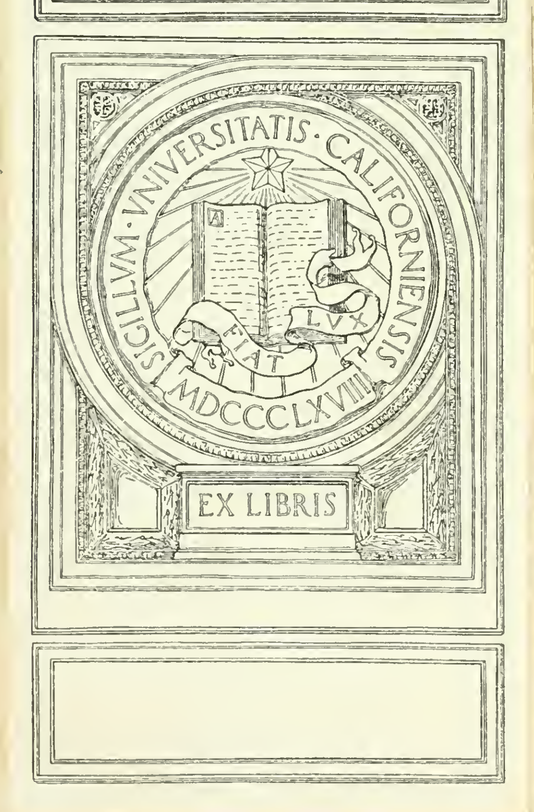
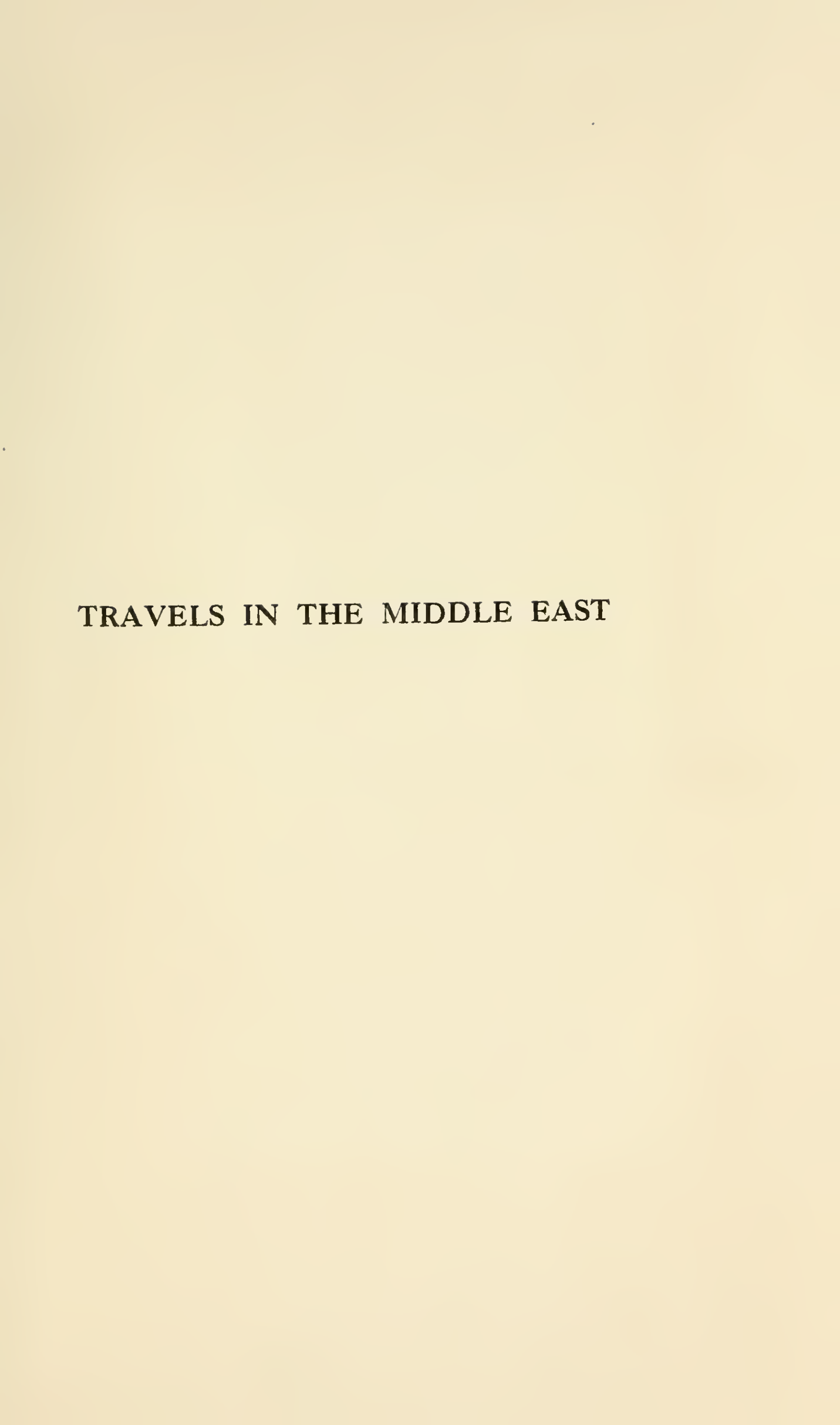
TRAVELS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

CAPTAIN T. C. FOWLE


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TRAVELS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



IN THE MADRESSIH-I-SHAH HUSSEIN

TRAVELS

IN

THE MIDDLE EAST

Being Impressions by the Way in Turkish Arabia, Syria, and Persia

BY

CAPTAIN T. C. FOWLE
40TH PATHANS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS AND A MAP

LONDON
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1916

IN MEMORIAM

MY BROTHER

LIEUTENANT L. R. FOWLE

14TH KING GEORGE'S OWN FEROZEPORE SIKHS

KILLED IN ACTION IN THE DARDANELLES

JUNE 4, 1915



I am indebted to the Editors of THE ACADEMY, THE CORNHILL, THE PIONEER, THE SATURDAY REVIEW, THE TIMES OF INDIA, *and* THE WORLD'S WORK, *for permission to have re-published in this book matter which originally appeared under their auspices.*



PREFACE

The question which is most frequently put to the returned traveller by his kindly, curious friends with regard to the regions which he may have traversed may be summed up in the query, 'What is it like ?' It is the question which has most frequently greeted the writer ; it is the question which he invariably puts to other returned wayfarers. Some of us may be interested in the politics or economics, the sociology or anthropology, or any of the other more abstruse features of foreign lands, but we are all interested in the 'What is it like ?' of them. And what do we mean when we ask this question ? We mean, what experiences did the traveller have in his wanderings in those countries ? How did he travel ? What sort of country did he traverse ? Where did he sleep o' nights, and what did he eat ? Of what kind were the folk with whom he rubbed shoulders ? Did he perchance have any adventures ? And so forth. Nor do we expect the traveller in reply to display any undue false modesty in thrusting himself into the background. Not that we necessarily feel a special interest in the personality of the traveller himself, but it is through

him that we vicariously enjoy his travels, and if he interests us many capital ' I's ' may be forgiven him.

If, therefore, the writer can be said to have any object in this book beyond the already ambitious one of pleasing the reader, it is to answer the question, ' What is it like travelling in the Middle East ? ' Not that he has any illusions as to this ambition being attained. Amongst all the multitude of travel-books written since first Man set out upon the Open Road, there are perhaps a dozen—if as many—which answer this simple question, ' What is it like ? ' and *Travels in the Middle East* is not one of them. But the writer has the less excuse for the extent to which he may fail in his object, since the scope of his journeys cut, as it were, a very fair ' section ' through the various strata of Middle Eastern travel. These journeys consisted of two ' language-leaves ' from India, the first to Turkish Arabia and Syria, the second to Persia, for the purpose of studying respectively Arabic and Persian. The itinerary of the first was : Karachi to Busra via the Persian Gulf, Busra to Baghdad up the Tigris, a stay in Baghdad of some three months, a short trip to the borders of Kurdistan, Baghdad to Damascus via Palmyra, and a sojourn in Damascus of about three and a half months. Thence back to India by the ordinary steamer route—Beyrout, Port Said, the Red Sea, &c. In the second trip, starting from Quetta, the writer proceeded to Seistan by the trade route across the Baluchistan desert, thence up to Meshed via Birghand, and thence to Teheran via Askabad, the

Transcaspian Railway, the Caspian Sea to Baku, and Baku to Resht. From Teheran he travelled south to Ispahan, thence out of Persia via the Lynch Road to Ahwaz, the Karun river to Mohammerah, and back to India via the Gulf.

These two trips were taken, it is hardly necessary to say, and the records of them written, before the War broke out. The result of the tremendous struggle now in progress will bring, of course, considerable changes to the Middle East, and it may seem that such changes will make this book not so much a picture—as far as it is a picture at all—of present-day travel in the countries concerned as of travel-conditions of a bygone age; that it may haltingly answer the question, 'What was it like?' instead of 'What is it like?' It is true that with the changes may come those revolutionaries of travel—railways; that where the writer's caravan bells tinkled merrily there may one day be heard the raucous scream of the locomotive; and that journeys which took the writer weeks of preparation and months of actual wayfaring may be accomplished by the reader in a few days after five minutes' conversation at a booking-office. But it is also true that the said changes will in the main affect politics, of which this book contains no mention from cover to cover; that railways are not built in a day nor yet in a year; that even when—if ever—they stretch across the Middle East they will be few and far between, and that in the wide spaces 'between' will still lie the happy hunting-grounds of the traveller,

where wayfaring will stretch before him in all its primitive fascination as it did before the writer. And as for the cities, the life of which the writer has endeavoured to give some impression of in his chapters on Baghdad and Damascus, those—as far as the indigenous inhabitants are concerned—will continue to present the same features to the gaze of the traveller by whatever new mode of locomotion he may arrive at their gates.

THE AUTHOR.

October, 1915.

CONTENTS

PART I

TURKISH ARABIA AND SYRIA

PART II

PERSIA



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS





TRAVELS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

PART I

CHAPTER I

KARACHI TO BUSRA

THOUGH the sky was grey the day had not yet broken, and I stood leaning out of my carriage window sniffing at that little breeze which in the East is herald of the dawn. And I had need of that little breeze, and enjoyed it accordingly, for I was a passenger in the Lahore-Karachi express which the night before had crossed the Scinde desert.

The crossing of a desert at certain seasons, and by the proper means of locomotion, the camel, is not without its strange fascinations, but to cross it by train, and while the weather is still warm, is—in one word—Hades.

Hour after hour you live in a sand-storm raised by the rapid passage of the train through the air. Sand is in your hair, in your shoes, in your eyes, in your mouth, down your throat. A terrible gritty feeling pervades you from head to foot. At frequent intervals you wash your outside and your inside man with the

sandy tepid mixture which passes for water under such circumstances, and at every halt you have your carriage swept out. But in another half-hour the desert has once more flowed over you and your abode.

And as, with this twelve hours of nightmare behind me, and my train journey about to end, I stood and drank in the fresh morning breeze, I felt a strange sweet tang in the air, and knew that I smelt the sea. . . .

Karachi is a city which has not yet come to her own as any of her residents will tell you. At some future date when various railways, as yet but dotted lines on the map, are converted into iron rails laid on firm earth, she will assuredly come into her kingdom with all the pomp and circumstance of a great commerce, and will bear the tide of the East and West trade roaring through her gates, and her rivals will gnash their teeth with envy.

But for the present she sleeps, a city of the desert, with sand-strewn streets on which her traffic moves noiselessly, silent and somehow sinister. Even her vehicles smack of the primitive wastes from which she has arisen, for you can see many carts drawn by camels, which lounge along at their accustomed leisurely gait. Her houses likewise are low, and straggle amazingly, sure sign of a young township—young in progress, if not in site—before rising rents force the sky-scrapers upwards.

If you should explore her at night, Karachi is even more of the East. She has all the silence of an Oriental town after dark. Little or none of the life of a Western town—or of a Western town in the East, such as Calcutta—with its blazing shop windows, its open doors of theatres, its quick come and go of motor-sped traffic, is hers. Rather does she present to your view wide

squares, empty or perhaps occupied by a café, at which under palm trees the townsfolk collect after the manner of the Arabs (and, indeed, one sees not a few Arabs amongst them); white-faced houses shining in the moonlight, many-windowed, flat-roofed; dark mysterious lanes, narrow and tortuous.

No! Karachi has not yet come to her own in the march of progress, but perhaps is none the less interesting thereby to the casual traveller with an eye for contrasts.

It is as well for the traveller if, at the outset of his journey, he can put himself under the protection of some patron saint of wayfarers, more especially a saint with powers local to the territory which he proposes to traverse—Ganesh of the Elephant Head for India, but who for the Persian Gulf? No saint could I find for this corner of the world, and so was fain to pay my vows to a certain famous traveller and put myself under his ægis.

For if you know your *Arabian Nights* you may perchance remember the following passage:

> So we took ship and set sail by the permission of God (whose name be exalted). And destiny favoured us, and the wind aided us, and we ceased not to travel by day and night until we reached the city of El-Bussorah.

And having remembered so much you will undoubtedly be able to fit the quotation to its author—Sindbad the Sailor.

Having thus acquired a patron saint, as well as more mundane necessaries in the shape of steamer tickets and the like, I was ready to depart, and one fine morning stepped off the quay into the sailing-boat which was to bear me steamer-wards.

The great lateen sail bellied from the breeze, the boat heeled over, little ripples whispered along the side, and with my bag and baggage—two mule trunks, a Wolseley valise, and a saddle—I moved down channel to where the up-Gulf mail had her nose pointed to the open sea. It was good, after nigh on four years' total abstinence, to sail again on the face of the waters, to hear the soughing of the bow meeting a wave, the creak of the ropes, and to see the harbour set fair in the sun to the moving shipping.

It was better that evening, leaning on the taffrail, to watch the sunset's panoply gild the sea and sky, the twain equally calm ; to watch, and scan with the imagination—beyond the gold of the horizon—the coasts of Arabia, and the minarets of cities hitherto but cold names on the map, and wide deserts, and months of wayfaring with no master but the whim of the day and the turn of the road.

There are two boats by which you can go up the Gulf, both of which belong to the B.I.S.N. Company. The fast mail will rush you up to Busra in six days ; the subsidiary mail, proceeding leisurely, and lading and unlading cargo at many ports, will land you there in ten to twelve. Ours was the latter, so leaving Karachi we skirted the Mekran coast and touched at little places, Pusnie, Charbar, and Jask—this latter after Maskat—on the Persian side, and Debai on the Arabian, which the mail ignores completely. All these spots are as like one another as the dots which represent them on the map. Of a sudden, coming up from the saloon, you will find the ship at anchor, a good two miles from the land. Here on the straight sea-shore—without pretence of harbour—you will perceive some mud

huts, nearly merging into the sand on which they rest. In front stretches the sea burnished into molten silver by the sun, behind rise bare sand-coloured hills, on either hand the sandy coast runs uninterrupted, and the glare is intolerable.

On shore, with sand trickling over the edges of one's boots, even in November it is warm, and one makes one's way gladly to a building, a little apart from the miserable bazaar, over which flies the flag. And the flag, which one never notices folding and unfolding itself majestically over public mansions in the important places of the earth, claims one's attention, and perhaps something more, in these outposts of Empire. Here, flouting the open sea and the stark Mekran hills, it is not so much a decoration as an emblem.

Beneath the flag one is received courteously with a cool drink, and the superintendent of the telegraph office is pleasantly communicative. 'Yes, there are only just ourselves, myself and my assistant. Of course, there is the guard. All the places up the Gulf have detachments from the Indian Army as guards. A trifle lonely? Well, perhaps. We're not so well off as at Jask, for instance, where there are at least twelve men in the telegraph office, a hockey ground, and a billiard table. Letters of any sort, of course, only once a week. A bit warm in the hot weather?' (Looking out of the window across the sand dunes, to the glare of the sea—as one asks this question—one can in imagination see the heat wave rise to heaven.) 'Not too cool, certainly. The ladies feel it rather. Ladies in these places? Oh, yes, sometimes. Always some at Jask.' (Mary, pity women up the Gulf in the hot weather!) 'There are worse places than this, too.

There's a telegraph station on the other side of the Gulf where there's a white man by himself. Never has a soul to talk English to from month's end to month's end. What, got to get back to the ship? Have another whisky and soda? No? Well, good-bye. Hope you'll have a pleasant trip.' . . .

The boom of the ship's signal gun woke me with a start, and by the grey dawn I saw that we were floating peacefully on the dark waters of a great lake—so it seemed—girdled with high cliffs still ringing with the echoes of the shot, while from in front a silent white-faced town stared gravely down on us with innumerable window-eyes. And this was Maskat—the Maskat of my first impressions, at any rate. Later there were others. The lake was no lake, but a harbour; two castles flanked the town on either hand, and behind towered a peak-topped hill. Later still I went ashore.

Maskat keeps its windows for the sea front. Once past the British Consulate, and you find yourself in narrow bye-ways, scarce room for two abreast, while on either side the blind walls of houses rise cliff-like to a thin strip of sunny sky. But down below there is no sun, or heat, or sound—only the cool shade, the shuffle of one's feet in the sand, and the solitary figure of a cloaked Arab striding leisurely. Who lives behind these silent walls? What plots and counter-plots are hatched behind their friendly barriers? What strange eddies here commence of the East whose fringes touch the Wahabis at Riad or the Pathan in the far-off Khyber hills? Behind this iron door, gun-runners, or the beauties of the harem? And instinctively one pauses in one's step for the glimpse of a fair hand and the tinkle of a silvery laugh. But the door opens not,

the blind walls seem to frown, and there is no sound save the shuffle of one's feet in the sand. . . .

I have said that the small fry of the Gulf ports—Pusnie, Charbar, and their ilk—are alike as so many peas, and in truth the large ones are unable to present any startling peculiarities from each other. There is the same sandy straight foreshore, the same long white line of houses with dark masses of palms here and there, and the same crowd of native craft with their queer ungainly sails. As one draws near there is the same evil-smelling beach, with boats half built, or left by the falling tide. A few women wash their clothes in the pools, a few boys play with shrill cries up and down the sand, some curs—scavenging for their daily bread—slink aside as one's boat grates upon the beach. Over the Consulates and the houses of the local powers that be, flutter many-coloured flags, and over the flags in the blue vault hang vultures, ever wheeling. To be sure, they call up different memories—do these said ports—in retrospect. Bander Abbas and Bushire we were fain to explore from the ship's rail, at the end of our glasses. From the former the laws of quarantine debarred us, and from the latter the distance of our anchorage from the shore.

Lingah, to me at any rate, is a place of lonely squares flooded by the moonlight—for we landed at evening—with palm trees sending fantastic shadows across our path as we stumbled after our cloaked guide, lantern in hand. Now and then a figure muffled to the eyes came from the shadows, peered at us askance, exchanged a hasty word with our guide, and disappeared again into the shadows from which it came.

At Bahrein you will remember that my patron saint,

Sindbad the Sailor, did some very good trading. It was on his return from the City of the Monkeys, where he had obtained many coconuts by the simple expedient of pelting the creatures with stones until they pelted *him* with the precious fruit. On his arrival at Bahrein he induced some pearl-divers, by the payment of a coconut apiece, to make a descent. 'And lo! when they came up out of the water they had with them many pearls of price. And they said, "By God, O our Lord, thy luck is great."'

Remembering this fortunate episode, I had visions of myself seated in a boat, smoking my pipe at my ease, while energetic divers brought wealth, beyond the dreams of avarice, to my feet. But unfortunately, on our arrival at Bahrein I discovered that the pearl season was over until the next hot weather warmed the water, and even if it had not been so, I doubt whether I should have made my fortune. For I learnt that most of the trading is in the hands of *banias* (money-lenders and merchants) from Hindustan, and when the *bania* has squeezed the orange there is not much juice left. The greater number of the pearl-divers are completely in the hands of their masters the merchants, from whom they are compelled to obtain all the necessaries of life, and thus are as a rule heavily in their debt. Bahrein has apparently not been backward in adopting one of the leading maxims of civilised trade, that one shall sow and another reap.

At Koweit I saw the Bedouin on the edge of his native desert. Here he comes with horses, cattle, and sheep to barter for fire-arms, dates, and clothing. Outside the town was his encampment—a confused mass of camels, bales, odds and ends of gear, black dwarfish

tents, women, children, and prowling dogs. Over all rose a babel of grunts, babblings, shrill cries, and the occasional yelp of a dog visited with vengeance for too bold an attempt at pilfering. And amidst this noise, confusion, and scuffling, moved the Bedouin, stately, calm, and aloof, one of the last picturesque figures left to a civilised world. A long cloak hangs from his shoulders, with broad sleeves which leave full play to his sinewy wrists and well-shaped hands. Open at the front, this reveals a long garment resembling the dressing-gown of the Western world, gathered in the midst with a waist-cloth into which are stuck a couple of silver-handled daggers. Over the head, and drawn forward at each side so as to resemble a headpiece of old, is a gay-coloured kerchief, round which are twisted rings of camel hair. From under the kerchief stares out a dark sombre face, with keen dark eyes puckered at the edges with much watching against the desert sun, and well-cut features. Over his shoulder hangs a rifle by its sling; a full bandolier crosses his chest. Such is the Bedouin, the Spirit of the Desert made manifest in flesh. Such was he that day at Koweit; such was he long centuries ago or ever Mohammed was born to Amina, wife of Abdullah, the merchant of Mecca. Not otherwise can we imagine him on the Last Day, facing the assembled nations, stately, calm, and aloof. . . .

The scene 'tween decks when unloading was in progress—a scene repeated at every port—was of perennial interest, especially if at night. Leaning over the rail of the upper deck, calmed by one's after-dinner cigarette, one watched as from high Olympus the stirrings of the mortals below. Overhead the electric light flared; under it the great 'buggalows'

(native boats) rose and fell gently against the ship's side; the deck teemed with the movements of many men, and sent up to heaven the sound of many voices and the harsh rattle of machinery; whilst all around the night encompassed us, dark and impenetrable.

After a while the eye began to dissect the component parts of this hurly-burly. Supreme above it was the chief officer, conspicuous in white, wielding the voice of authority, bidding this one go to Tophet, and that one come. Near by stood the tally-clerks, notebook in hand, elaborately arrayed in long frock-coats and fezzes, oblivious to all but the checking of the bales. A crowd of ragged coolies formed connecting links between the holds and the boats, their voices sounding sepulchrally from the former and with no uncertain discord from the latter. Around these the bees of the hive crowded the drones, the deck passengers: Arabs in long cloaks of divers colours; Persians in pleated skirts, with tall fezzes; old men with long patriarchal beards; women enveloped from head to foot in black, funereal garments, with white face-pieces; children in rags; some sheltered in little corners made by erecting their packages of stuff; some with only a blanket; some cooking, some smoking from large hubble-bubbles; a few, more devout than the rest, perusing their Korans.

And by the side of these placid Biblical figures of a bygone age the machinery clanked and groaned, brought up large bales from the depths of the hold—while the coolies yelled caution as one man—swung them across the deck, and lowered them into the waiting buggalows. It was a strange medley of the East



MASKAT

and West rubbing shoulders, the twentieth century and the first cheek and jowl. . . .

At Koweit we took on board a pilot to navigate us up to Busra. He looked three-quarters negro to one Arab, but a kindly and loyal heart must have beat under his uncouth exterior. For: 'See our old pilot ?' asked the second officer. 'Funny-looking old card, isn't he ? Well, apparently at one time he was slave, or servant, of some fellow in rather a big way up in these parts. The fellow died, and his son got into trouble over killing a man ; Turks took him and put him in prison. Well, our old pilot worked heaven and earth to get him off ; he gets a good screw, you know, does a pilot, and he spent it right and left—"backshish," of course. It seems he got him off all right, too, and then spent most of his hard-earned gains in having him smuggled out of the country. I call it rather fine on the old fellow's part.'

Yes, it was quite fine of him, and long may he live to take ships across the bar and up the Shat-el-Arab to Busra!

It is a relief on entering the Shat-el-Arab to have a cool green vista of date-palms on either hand in place of the sea glare and barren sandy coasts. And it is fitting that the country should be restful to the eye, for here in the beginning was the Garden of Eden, here did our first parents fall, and hence were they driven out, whilst behind them stood an angel 'with a flaming sword which turned every way,' so that never more might tired humanity find its way back to the shady groves.

CHAPTER II

BUSRA TO BAGHDAD

One is not long in the East, outside those parts of it controlled by the British Government, before one discovers that one is under the special protection of Providence. Everything will occur—or not—by the will of God, and if you make statements without the proviso of *In sha Allah* (If God wills) your speech is looked upon as mildly irreverent, and is mildly corrected. If God willed the river steamer would leave Busra for Baghdad on a certain date, and under the same proviso would slip her moorings at 3 P.M., the advertised time of sailing. With the first, God's disposal was in accord with man's proposal; but not so with the second, for it was not until 5 P.M. that our paddles began to churn the waters of the Tigris.

'We shall reach Baghdad, then,' I remarked, 'on Saturday next.'

'*In sha Allah,*' corrected the Turkish captain gently.

We were carrying pilgrims to Kerbela, the great Shiah shrine situated about sixty miles from Baghdad. How many hundreds I don't exactly know, but certainly more than the *Baghdad* could comfortably hold. For in spite of much vociferation and gesticulation on

the part of the chief clerk, who withstood them for a time at the top of the companion-stairs, they pressed forward with their wives, their children, and their bales, and finally took possession of the space reserved for first-class passengers. The captain, blue-suited and fezzed, shrugged his shoulders as we came forward and took refuge on his quarter-deck. 'At this time,' he said, philosophically lighting a cigarette, 'there are many many pilgrims all going to Kerbela, and they must travel somehow.'

However, with a plentiful supply of cigarettes, a book or two, my fellow-passengers, and the panorama of the banks slipping past on either hand, the hours sped away as quickly as the swirling water.

Filled by the sense of movement, I could watch with a placid interest the pastoral life on the banks, from which the great bare plains stretch away on either hand to a far horizon. Now and then a horseman, rifle on back, stood on a little mound, clear-cut as a statue against the sky. Now and then we passed a Bedouin encampment—low black booths, hobbled camels and horses, lounging men, and screaming women and children, who scurried along with us, scrambling for the bread and dates thrown by the passengers. Anon would come a sail moving, so it seemed, in the midst of the land, but when we had travelled a little further, lo! it was but a bend in the river and a great clumsy country boat which had created the illusion. Sometimes we passed wooden erections for drawing water from the river, worked by two bullocks or horses. Once we neared, where the river narrowed, some men, armed as usual, one of whom proceeded to cover me with his weapon, doubtless in jest, as, if they had medi-

tated an attack, they would have been in larger numbers. Nevertheless, as I happened to be on the bridge at the time, offering a conspicuous mark, and as a motion begun in jest might end in earnest—the temptation of bringing down a Feringhi proving too strong to be resisted—with as great a show of nonchalance as I could assume, I walked slowly to the other side and put the chart-room between myself and the jester.

The pilgrims, too, were always a source of interest, and, by reason of the overcrowding, were in very close contact with us. They lay sprawling over the deck around the clear oasis still left exclusively for our use, so that one picked one's way carefully to and from the companion-hatch over prostrate bodies. They were for the most part Persians, who are practically all of the Shiah sect, fairish of face, with great conical caps, sheepskin coats, and dirty blue dressing-gown garments. They gathered in little groups of families or chance acquaintances, building up their bales as a precaution against the wind. Some of the more wealthy—probably by the purchase of deck space from their fellows—arranged little harems for their women by devices of hanging cloths, though to the outsider it would seem that these temptresses of the virtuous were already sufficiently protected from prying eyes. For one and all wore the *burkha*, a great shapeless garment with elephantine sleeves, effecting a complete concealment of form and face, and only allowing the eyes to appear.

There was, however, one fair pilgrim who was by no means content to hide herself behind her black shroud, but then she was privileged by her youth, being not more than six or seven years old. She had that

peculiar beauty which is often granted to the younger generation in the East to compensate for its rapid decline, and moreover a very decided will of her own. She bullied her father—a venerable white-beard—her presumable brother, and her mother in the most delightful way possible, and the way she would coquette her *burkha*, in imitation of the more flighty of her elders, with her playmates, two ragged urchins, turning first a cold little shoulder, then a peeping and finally a piquante little face, all merry with smiles, was one of the most engaging sights I have ever seen. Poor little maiden! It was sad to think that once of age she was likely to be sold by her parents in loveless marriage to some fat old merchant of Shiraz, who would squeeze her young life dry, and then make of her a household drudge. Great beauty in the East is a family asset in hard cash, not lightly forgone.

Although they were on their way to a shrine which is at least as sacred in their eyes as Mecca is in the eyes of the Sunnis, the pilgrims did not seem very zealous in the matter of prayer. One only of the five times during the day did they honour with any approach of unanimity. All during the day they would lounge about the deck, sleeping for the most part, but when the evening came, and the setting sun flared the western sky and the river with crimson, turning towards it, they would make their devotions to Allah. This accomplished, they would gather in little circles around their charcoal braziers and eat the evening meal, sending forth rich odours into the night, which now gathered quickly around.

Now and again a pilgrim would go a-begging from his fellow-travellers. It would seem that there was

an etiquette in this matter, the needy one not asking of himself but through the medium of a patron. The latter, loud of voice and gesticulating, would go the round of the deck, importuning all and sundry, and detailing the merits of the particular case in hand, become penniless so far from home, and while performing the sacred duty of pilgrimage. The former, poor wretch, in rags and looking half starved, would follow in rear, uttering no word, but beseeching with his looks. Once or twice I contributed something, which must have put a handle to the arguments of the patron. For if a Christian's heart was melted by his eloquence, hard indeed must that Moslem be who refused his *zakat* (alms).

CHAPTER III

IN BAGHDAD

WE arrived at Baghdad in the most un-Oriental weather. A grey sky, a cold wind, and the waters of the Tigris whipped to small waves. So Baghdad impressed itself rather as how it would have looked under a bright sun than how it actually appeared. First came gardens sheltering detached balconied houses overlooking the river—deserted, too, for these were the summer residences of the wealthy classes. Still steaming, and passing garden after garden, we reached Baghdad itself, a long vista of fine houses rising from the river banks, backed by the tumbled mass of the city, and overtopped by the blue minarets and cupolas of the mosques. Flocks of pigeons hovered over these, women washed their clothes where the narrow streets ran down to the water's edge, across the bridge of boats endless passengers passed, the long balconies of the coffee-shops were crowded, and innumerable *gugas* whirled giddily in the tide. These last added the necessary touch of quaintness to the scene, being perfectly round constructions, propelled by paddling, and of an antiquity stretching back to Herodotus. Taking it as a whole, it was animated, pleasingly strange to the eye of the traveller, and needed but a flashing sun to make

it perfect of its kind. But unfortunately the traveller cannot bring his weather with him, or, for the matter of that, his emotions.

Having taken a temporary footing in the building which does duty for a hotel in Baghdad, I went house-hunting. To a bachelor—in a profession which necessitates much shared quarters with other beings—the prospect of a house to himself was not without charm, especially in the city of the *Arabian Nights*. And as the hunting-grounds lay through a city which was virgin soil for the hunter, where he gathered new impressions of a new people at every step, the hours passed quickly enough. Among these first impressions the one that strikes most forcibly is the narrowness of the streets. When one finds oneself in a lane barely eight feet broad, when to avoid the crushing of toes by a passing carriage one has to pancake against the wall, it is difficult to believe that this is the principal thoroughfare, the Piccadilly of Baghdad. Yet it is so, notwithstanding the fact that the streets, being unmetalled, are merely of beaten earth, with many hills and valleys. Then the houses force themselves on the attention. They bound the streets on either hand with high blank faces. There are no windows by which to get a glimpse of their inner life, no gardens visible with pleasant flowers. They have an air of hostile secretiveness to the wandering eye. Even their doors—of iron set deep in archways—seem rather made to bar one's passage than to open and let one through.

Coming from India, one misses the large and important turban in the headgear of the people who tread the narrow streets between the frowning walls.

In its place are the coloured kerchiefs of the Arabs, drawn over the head and beringed with camel's hair; or the small, inadequate-seeming turbans of the Persians, or the fezzes of the Turks. As for their garments, first impressions are of voluminous outer cloaks, overflowing under ones, a warring kaleidoscope of colour.

After many wanderings, and openings of heavy iron doors which only closed again behind my dissatisfied back, I at length found the house wherein I write this. It fronts an alley-way so narrow that I have christened it the Needle's Eye, no camel, I am convinced, being able to pass through. It leads off an alley slightly broader, which turns into the lane constituting Baghdad's principal street. It has no windows, and offers in true Eastern fashion a blank face to the few passers-by. Few, because the Needle's Eye is not a frequented thoroughfare. Now and then a couple of urchins sport up and down; a woman, enveloped in her shapeless black cloak, shuffles by; a beggar raises his mournful whine before my door. But for the rest it is left to stray cats and dogs, who prowl and fight and sleep away the sunny hours.

So we find ourselves in the alley-way before my door, which is not of iron. In truth my imagination longed for an iron portal—that would have given the final touch of the Orient to my abode, that would in very sooth have made my house my castle. But the houses which possessed iron doors also possessed disadvantages, so I was fain to descend to a mere wooden one. Perhaps I should have taken the disadvantages with the iron portals, and so satisfied my imaginative conscience; one should, of course, endeavour to live up to ideals. But I am punished for my backsliding

in this matter by the loss of a sensation—its absence barely noticed, but surely there—every time I pass in or out.

At any rate, the door is sunk deep in its arch—like its betters, the iron ones; it looks stout enough to resist a battering-ram, and we pass through. We find ourselves in a small courtyard with a balcony running round three sides, not on the ground level, but one storey up. On the ground level are the kitchen, store-room, servants' quarters, and *sardab* (summer quarters)—these latter beneath the ground level for greater coolness in the hot months. The four rooms for the use of the owner of the mansion are off the balcony. The first I do not use; the second is my dining-room, sparsely furnished; the third my bedroom, still more Spartan; the fourth the room where I live, move, and have my being, and where, consequently, some attempt at comfort in the shape of divans, Persian carpets, and book-littered tables has been made. Such a thing as a furnished house to let in Baghdad is unknown; and as a traveller—sojourning there but for a space—it profited not that I should invest in more encumbrances than the comfort of the body absolutely required.

All houses in Baghdad are built on very much the same plan as mine—that is to say, round a courtyard, with the *sardabs* down below. The larger sometimes possess two courtyards, the outer for the men, the inner for the harem, with fountains, tessellated pavements, and so forth; but these are not for the wayfarer, here to-day, gone to-morrow, with a light pack and a lighter pocket.

Baghdad is a city of coffee-houses, among other

things—*khawa-khanas,* as they are called. They vary in size between little dark recesses just holding the proprietor and his coffee-cups, while his patrons stand drinking in the street, to large open halls holding a hundred or more. Undoubtedly, the best *khawa-khana* in Baghdad is the *Khawa-Khana al Jisr* (the Bridge Coffee-house), and half-past four of an evening, as a rule, saw me turning down the lane which leads to it from the main bazaar. Mounting the dark earthen-stepped staircase, I would find myself in a large room, and, crossing to the outside balcony, would take a seat from which to view both the free spaces outside and the crowded life within.

The room is large and airy, with wooden pillars supporting the roof ; seated on wooden benches covered with straw matting are the coffee-drinkers. These are mostly of the well-to-do of Baghdad—merchants, whether Turkish, Christian, or Jewish ; so the fez, surmounting the ordinary garb of civilisation, predominates. Here and there, however, flowing robes, with small turbans or wool-ringed kerchiefs on head, proclaim pure Persians or Arabs, some of the latter especially taking the attention. Their gait as they lounge into the hall seems to speak of the desert. Their cloaks are coarser, stronger, seem made more for use and less for show than those of their degenerate fellows of the town. In like manner, their faces are harder, darker, as though tanned by the unthwarted sun. They take their coffee in taciturn silence, watching with some contempt their gesticulating, babbling fellows. Their eyes are glare-wrinkled ; they have something of a free, predatory air. Perhaps they are of Nejd, or Hail, or still more distant Riad.

The rest of the customers, however, pursue their way unmindful of scrutiny. Some recline almost at full length, puffing *narghilehs* (water-pipes); some, cross-legged, smoke cigarettes; others sip their tea or coffee; others play at draughts, chess, or backgammon —the latter the favourite game; others again, their coffee and smoking finished, gather in little groups, discussing the news of the day. A bespectacled old man reads aloud the paper to a couple of other grey-beards in one corner, and in another the Koran is being softly chanted. Among them moves the beggar whom the charity of the proprietor allows in to ask alms of his patrons; the water-boy, jar under arm, chain over shoulder, metal dish in hand, selling water at half a farthing a drink; the dispensers of the coffee, clinking their china cups, metal pot under arm, and their satellites, the urchins who collect the empty vessels. So from the room rises a cheerful bustle, the sound of many voices, the sharp click of the pieces on the backgammon boards, and now and again athwart the whole the cry of *khawa-khawa* from an impatient customer.

No sooner am I seated than the proprietor himself hurries up with a smiling greeting, calling loudly for a *narghileh.* Perhaps I am the only Feringhi in Baghdad who regularly frequents a coffee-shop, and Mahmud considers it a special testimony to his house that this should be the one chosen for my patronage. The *narghileh,* I think, he looks upon as a shibboleth of good faith, an open sign that under his roof I conform to its customs, that when I am in Baghdad I do as Baghdad does. As the *narghileh* gives its first bubble, and I puff out the first cloud of smoke, Mahmud smiles

anew and departs. In the meanwhile an attendant has brought me my tea in a tiny glass, milkless, but with a large piece of sugar slowly crumbling in its amber depths; for this is the custom of the coffee-houses—first tea, then coffee. Presently he returns with coffee, which he pours into a diminutive cup, holding perhaps three teaspoonfuls. Even this the attendant—for his other customers—fills but half full, when it is drunk at a draught, and returned for another helping. For me, however, he fills it, brimming over, so that I may sip as I smoke, a habit not in vogue among the Arabs. As for the coffee itself, it is milkless, unsweetened, and of an excellent quality untasted elsewhere.

Here on the balcony it is very pleasant. Twenty feet sheer below the Tigris flows broadly, slowly past. From the further bank many-windowed, irregular, flat-shaped houses rise stately. Behind the houses tall date-palms move gently in the evening breeze against the setting sun, which gilds the sky, and soon, descending, touches the water with crimson. On the right the bridge of boats bears its complement of small figures crossing to and fro. A *guga* paddles its way leisurely across the crimson flood; far down the stream a single country craft remains becalmed with hoisted sail. Two more are tied to the bank beneath us, their crews on deck mending the gear. A little while and the sun vanishes suddenly from behind the palms; a mist rises from the river; the long high-pitched cry of a *muezzin* rises from a neighbouring minaret, and is taken up by another, and another; the Arab boatmen below turn to prayer. In the coffee-shop behind, the hanging lamps are lit. The day is past. . . .

Baghdad, though in some ways the most Oriental of towns, possesses one Occidental luxury—music-halls, of a sort. Mohammedan public opinion, however, insisting as it does on the veil for its womenkind, would hardly tolerate that the *danseuses* should profess its faith. So the ladies of the *corps de ballet* are mostly Jewesses from Aleppo and Beirut, with a few local products, and Baghdad goes nightly to see them perform.

Behold us, then—my friends, A. Effendi and M. Effendi, and myself—ready to set out on the path of pleasure. The Effendis have dined with me, we have finished our coffee and cigarettes, and it remains but to don fez and overcoat for the expedition to be ready. I wear a fez sometimes at night, not with any idea of passing as a Turk or Baghdadi if spoken to—my Arabic is very far short of that ideal—but merely to avoid the curious glances of the crowd. Nothing spoils enjoyment so much as being the centre of attention, as seeing a neighbour nudge *his* neighbour and the two look covertly, until perhaps half a dozen pairs of eyes are turned upon one. However innocent and harmless the curiosity may be, it gives an uncomfortable feeling of self-consciousness. A stray European now and then wanders into a Baghdad theatre, but is sufficiently a *rara avis* to share with the stage some of the attention of the audience. Nor can this be avoided except by the expedient of a fez. A cap immediately 'gives one away,' and a bare head equally so—for the fez, like the turban, is never taken off indoors. On the other hand, in a fez and a dark suit—the dress of the greater part of upper-class Baghdad, whether Christian or Mohammedan, Jew or Gentile—one passes without comment.

A. Effendi is a youth of about twenty, but uncommonly old for his years. He belongs to a well-known, wealthy and respectable merchant family in Baghdad. His uncle, besides his principal occupation, indulges in journalism, and is editor of one of the fourteen newspapers in Baghdad—*El Irak*—not the name the paper bears in print, but no matter. I gather that *El Irak*, with thirteen competitors among such a small public, is not a stupendous success from the sordid financial point of view, and is carried on for the pleasure it gives its editors. Art for art's sake! It was this which first attracted me to A. Effendi. For I, too, have been editor *en amateur* of a journal, now defunct, which, far from being a pecuniary success, necessitated sundry disbursements from the editorial pocket. We foregathered on the river passage from Busra, and renewed our acquaintance in Baghdad.

M. Effendi is a somewhat older man. He has a good taste in cigarettes, and affects a somewhat uncommon brand, of which he was kind enough to present me with a hundred. Both talk French fluently besides Turkish, as do the majority of educated Baghdadis; so when my Arabic fails I eke it out with the first language.

Having started—preceded by our servants carrying lanterns—the first point to decide is which theatre, for there is a choice of four in Baghdad.

The Jisr coffee-shop which I frequent during the day is at night metamorphosed into a *café chantant*, at which Thera, the 'beautiful Egyptian,' sings and dances. In the lower floor of the same building a rival beauty trips and warbles, while in the Midān bazaar are two more places of amusement.

We finally decide on the latter, and quicken our steps, for the Midān is far distant. Turning out of the Needle's Eye, our way lies through the uncovered bazaars. The shops are shuttered, the streets deserted save for a few chance wayfarers. Overhead the stars twinkle stilly in the black sky ; now and then we catch a gleam of water in the flickering light of a lamp on the river's edge at the end of an alley-way. The streets are empty of life until to-morrow's sun shall again set them astir. To the quick, jostling, noisy come and go under the blazing lights of a Western city at night, Baghdad offers dark, empty, silent bazaars. But it is not until we reach the great covered marts that we find the true Avernus. Here the arched roofs shut off the stars, and the gloom is as that of Tophet. Our steps sound muffled in the emptiness ; unconsciously we talk in whispers. Dark tunnels open on either hand ; we might be in caverns or vaults far under the earth. Save for the watchmen and the city dogs, we seem the only moving, living things. The former—crouched half asleep, swathed in their long cloaks—raise a cry of 'Ya ! Allah,' on our passing, as a warning to their brethren, and these in turn take up the mournful wail, which echoes and re-echoes far in front of us down the long aisles. The latter raise their voices in dismal barks and howls, which their enemies of the next section reply to—in the manner of Stamboul, each party having its own territory—until the roofs ring again.

Then suddenly a large open door flings a band of light across our path, and the sound of music, and the murmur of voices. We have arrived at the Theatre Royal, Baghdad.

The price of entrance, the same to any part of

the house, is not excessive—about fourpence, coffee and *narghilehs* extra. The hall is a tolerably large one, with a gallery all round. At the further end is the stage, at which we get a confused glimpse as we make our way to our places in the gallery above. Once there, our overcoats off, cigarettes lighted, we have opportunity to look round.

The shortest way to describe the entertainment would be to say that it was an Indian *nautch*. Those who have *not* seen an Indian *nautch* will at once conjure up some picture of Oriental fascination, bewitching the senses, deliciously wicked. Those who *have* will agree with me that it is one of the most boring entertainments possible for a European to watch. Sad am I to strike down another illusion, but so it is.

Nothing could be further from our ideas of ballet-dancing than those of the East. In the West it is mostly energetic movement, quick gesticulation of arms and legs, short skirts, and possibly high kicking; in the East it is all slow shuffling, imperceptible turning of the hands and head, twitches of the body never out of the perpendicular, limbs swathed to the toes. The *nautch*-girl shuffles this way and that, completes slow circles, thrusts her chin backwards and forwards, waves her hands stiffly from the wrists, and twitches all over like a sleeping seal. After five minutes you are fearfully weary of it, but do your best to conceal it from your Eastern friends, who watch it calmly, gravely, keenly interested, and will continue to do so until far into the morning. For the *nautch* is no duller, no more moral, not a whit less suggestive to Eastern eyes than the *pas seul* of the most daring *danseuse* in Europe is to Western onlookers. But it is different, that is all, and the

nautch remains a perfect epitome, in its way, of the gulf between East and West.

The singing is on the same plane, so far removed from the Western that one hardly draws a comparison. What can one say of an Eastern *prima-donna* who possesses not a single treble note in her voice, but who yet is said by educated Easterns to sing beautifully? Again one can only shrug shoulders, and say the East is different. It is a poor definition, criticism, what you will; but it is the best possible.

The performance at the Theatre Royal, Baghdad, was a *nautch*, with the difference that the artistes were Jewesses and not Mohammedans, and that for the most part they wore morning gowns of European cut, which made them look somewhat ridiculous. Altogether the performance was not exciting, and although that unfailing Eastern 'draw' to the Western traveller, the crowd, made up in part for the dullness of the stage, I was not sorry when we were once more walking homewards. . . .

An hour before noon M. Effendi and I set out one day for a continued exploration of Baghdad. M. Effendi was much amused at the idea of our miniature expedition, and we strode out of the Needle's Eye with a gait and seriousness as if bound for the perils of Nejd. Turning to the left, we found ourselves in a long street, which is the highway between the European quarter of the well-to-do classes and the native bazaars. Near the latter end a few solitary shops exist—outposts of the native town—but these soon cease, and we walked henceforth between blank walls, iron doors, and high overhanging windows. A little further on we met some maidens of the place—Christian Armenians,

by their dress—out to pay a morning call. Non-European Christians in Baghdad adopt the custom of veiling their womenfolk when out of doors, but in a far more artistic way than do the Moslems. The funereal shrouds of the Moslem women with their thick black veil give place to beautiful pieces of coloured silk, and veils so thin as to be merely attractive. Every face is beautiful behind a veil, and very pretty bits of colour did these maidens bring into the street as, passing on their way, they gave us a fleeting glance from mantles drawn coquettishly across.

The Bab-ash-Sharki (the Eastern Gate) is reached by the Road of the Strangler—a memorial to some garrotter long since gone to his account—and lies between gardens.

At the gate was a guard, and the inevitable coffee-house. It is a favourite resort for the town-dwellers, this *café* on the edge of the desert, where some of the fresh breezes come, and there was the usual complement of fezzes and kerchiefed heads puffing at *narghilehs* and basking in the sun. But beyond these the gate slept. East only by name, south-east by position, not two hundred yards away from the rippling Tigris, it bears no throng through its portals. It is one of the four ancient gates of Baghdad, but now its glory is departed and it sleeps away the hours with its loafers and coffee-drinkers.

One thing, however, does appear at the Bab-ash-Sharki, and that is the desert. We passed through, turned sharp to the left, and, ascending a slight incline, were on the edge of the great plain which stretches away to the mountains of Luristan. Baghdad is ringed with deserts. From whichever gate you travel you

cannot escape them, but from the Bab-ash-Sharki the desert comes suddenly. One moment we were in narrow streets, the next our horizon was bounded only by our eyesight. The wind blew fresh as across an ocean ; in the middle distance a file of camels moved microscopically ; from the city behind began the call to the mid-day prayer, faint and clear, *Alla-hu-Akbar, Alla-hu-Akbar* (God is most great, God is most great).

Here we could see the limits of eastern Baghdad—a dried moat, a crumbled wall—and rousing ourselves from the semi-trance born of large distances and far-off sounds, we walked the half-circle, always the desert on our right, the town on our left, passing the two gates—the Bab-at-Talism, still closed by the order of an ancient caliph, and the Bab-ul-Wustani. So some hours after leaving the Bab-ash-Sharki, we found ourselves at the Bab-ul-Muazzam. This is certainly the most imposing gate in modern Baghdad. The arch is high and complete ; the wall is so thick that houses are built upon it, and the *arabana* (carriages) to Mosul pass to and fro beneath. Outside, Arabs from caravans fed their animals or chaffed with the stall-holders. Now and then a string of camels or pack-horses streamed through, while their owners shouted '*Balag, balag*,' and the small urchins tried to stampede the frightened animals into the dividing crowd.

A little way inside the gate are the book-shops. Here you may purchase tomes in every language of the East, from the *Thousand and One Nights* to the Koran, and their vendors, gravely smoking, will often let you thumb the volumes without importuning you to buy.

To-day we had no time for loitering, and pressed forward into the heart of things—the great crowded, jostling, gesticulating, shouting bazaars. It was a wonderful scene. All along the side were the little shops, raised some three feet off the street, with their owners sitting cross-legged behind their wares. Overhead the great arched roofs shut off the sun and enclosed the hum of the vast hive to a dull roar. Underneath moved the crowd. And what a crowd! Flowing robes, colours of the rainbow; keen, dark faces, tossing hands, wide-opened mouths vociferating to be heard above the din. Arabs of the city, Bedouins of the desert, Persians from Shiraz, Turks from Stamboul, Jews, Christians—all crushed together pell-mell. Porters charged through the fray, shouting the universal '*Balag, balag*'; carriages followed hard on their track, driven at reckless speed, but the crowd only parted to join more firmly. Women shuffled timidly on from shop to shop, cast hither and thither by the stronger eddies. Auctions collected struggling whirlpools in which even hardy porters were lost to view. Water-sellers, bearing their merchandise in skins on the backs of horses, or in smaller bulk on their own backs, or in smaller bulk still in earthen bottles slung by a chain under the left arm, joined their cries to the hubbub. At the corners the money-changers clinked silver in a flowing stream from hand to hand. And in the midst of this pandemonium, among the legs of the passers-by, picked out by a shaft of light through the roof, two caged doves, for sale, pecked unconcernedly at their food, while their owner above extolled their plumpness and small price.

There are many covered bazaars in Baghdad, each

with its own trade. The bazaars of the iron-workers ringing like a blacksmith's shop, while the workers themselves, half-naked, stand out in the gloom against their own fires like figures of an inferno ; the clean, comparatively quiet bazaars of the carpet and cloth sellers, much frequented by women ; the bazaars of china and enamel ware, mostly in the hands of the Jews ; of the butchers, grisly with much slaughtered flesh ; of fruit, pleasant to the eye and smell ; of the *kabob* sellers, with simmering dishes of stews and balls of meat (*kabobs*), stuck through with skewers, roasting over gridirons—these and many more did we inspect. Then we sought rest and refreshment in the nearest coffee-shop. It now was three o'clock, and we had been some four hours afoot. As we sipped our first cups of tea gratefully, the cry of the *muezzins* calling to the *asr* (afternoon prayer) rose high even above the roar of the streets, and floated peacefully in on our ears—*Alla-hu-Akbar, Alla-hu-Akbar.*

It must have been nearly four when we rose regretfully, and set out once more, this time down to the bridge of boats which connects east with west Baghdad. The same crowds which filled the bazaars passed and repassed, but for the most part in silence, save for the occasional cry of a sweetmeat-seller, sitting cross-legged by the bridge-side. Here the air blew pleasant and chill up the river after the close streets, and seagull-like birds swooped over the sun-kissed wavelets and the plying *gugas*.

We paused a moment at the other side to look back at the best view of Baghdad, which is any one's property who takes the trouble to cross from bank to bank on a fine day. On the water's edge were the large white

houses, long-balconied, flat-roofed; behind rose minaret and cupolas into the blue sky, beringed with settling and hovering pigeons; in front rolled the great river with its busy bridge.

Western Baghdad is Baghdad's East End, as is only fit in the topsy-turvy East. On the east bank are the houses of the well-to-do, the large bazaars, the great mosques; on the west the mean houses of the poorer folk whose work lies in the eastern quarter, the smaller bazaars, the minaretless mosques. Yet for all that western Baghdad contains two things of note, its tramway and its busiest gate.

It was with something of a shock that I came upon the former. I felt a jarring note. A tram—even that ancient vehicle, a horse-tram—is centuries out of place in the city of the *Arabian Nights*. It does not thrust itself too much on the attention, that is one good point about it: it hides its decrepit modernity—for it is a very poor affair even as horse-trams go—exclusively in the western side, running a couple of miles to a Shiah shrine (Kazmain) outside the city.

As for the gate, though it is the busiest it is the least pretentious in the city. There is no definite arch, no wall, merely an open square into which the bazaars run. There is no startling contrast here between the busy streets and the silent desert; you reach the latter through scattered hovels, diminishing as you proceed, and high-walled gardens. Yet it is from here that the overland route to Aleppo and Europe begins; from here that the pilgrims set out to Kerbela; by this gate that the caravans arrive from Central Arabia.

We found it busy enough. A score of *arabana*

stood empty round the square ; more had just arrived and were disgorging their passengers. Pilgrims—Persians, for the most part, in tall conical caps and sheepskin coats—trudged in, Kerbala accomplished, their womenfolks following in horse-panniers. A string of laden camels padded past. All was bustle and the arrival of tired men and animals from many miles of wayfaring.

Here also ended our exploration ; but I had rather the feeling, which I suppose must come at the end of every exploration, of things unseen rather than those seen, places unvisited, streets untrod.

'There,' replied M. Effendi, 'will we explore another day. *In sha Allah* (If God wills).'

'*In sha Allah*,' I echoed.

CHAPTER IV

TO THE BORDERS OF KURDISTAN

TEN o'clock of a fine winter's morning, a month or so after my arrival in Baghdad, found me outside the Bab-ul-Muazzam with my caravan bound for the open road. Caravan! Let there not arise in your mind mistaken visions of a long line of swaying, shuffling camels. My caravan consisted of only three animals, and they were horses—ponies, to be quite accurate. One carried myself, one my servant Mohammed, perched high on layers of quilts—his bedding for the night—and one my goods and chattels for the journey—my valise, to wit, balanced on the other side by pots and pans and my gun-case. Hussein, the youth in charge of the horses, brought up the rear on foot.

Starting from the Bab-ul-Muazzam, for all you can see to the contrary, you might be bound on some desert journey of months. In front stretches away the bare brown desert to the flat horizon, and it is only from the map that you know that what lies beyond is not desert again, but the mountains and hills of Kurdistan.

Yet there was enough desert that fine January morning to dwarf my minute caravan into less than insignificance. Stamping its hoofs in the little court-

yard of my house, boring its way blusteringly through the crowded bazaars, my caravan had seemed of importance and moment. But here in the midst of that vast circle of horizon we dwindled down to five shadows, hurrying almost fearfully, as it were, over the sand in the midst of the encompassing solitude. For of all animals it is the camel, and the camel alone, who fits into the desert. Other animals, like my ponies, scurry fussily across it, knowing they are out of their proper sphere—the land of grass and hills—and speeding to reach it once more. But the camel moves leisurely in his own kingdom, lounging away one after another the long desert miles. No fear for him, no fuss, no slipping in the moving sand. Elsewhere incongruous, here he is the spirit of the land made manifest in the flesh. He belongs to the desert and the desert to him.

The wind was fresh, the sun was bright ; I had opened the gates on a new journey. *Al dunia taieb* (the world was pleasant), as the Arabs say simply.

At about three o'clock we arrived at our *khan*, Beni Said. A short stage this, starting late and halting early. But it is not wise policy to press one's men and beasts the first day.

So we alighted, and while Mohammed and Hussein unloaded the pack-pony, I made a tolerably straight line for the coffee-house adjoining the *khan*, for here tea, a *narghileh* (Turkish pipe), and peace were to be found.

Mohammed, my servant, was somewhat scandalised by this trait of mine of attending the public coffee-houses. He held my conduct to be unconventional on the part of a sahib, and would have had me shut

myself up in my room in the *khan*. Now, whatever position I may have held in the Indian station where my regiment happened to be quartered, thanks be to the god of liberty I held none in Turkish Arabia. So I bound myself by no shackles of respectability and foregathered with whom I pleased. There is of course a commonsense limit to this matter of foregathering with all and sundry, since familiarity breeds contempt, East as well as West. Still, it should be the traveller's aim to approach as near as may be to this limit, and with the exercise of some tact and a little knowledge of the local manners and customs the golden mean can usually be struck.

A word as to *khans*. In Europe you call them 'caravanserais'; in India we shorten it to 'serais'; in Asia Minor they become *khans*. But in India for English travellers there are 'dak bungalows' (rest-houses) along the roads, so this was my first experience of a *khan*. True to its type, it was built in the form of a square in two stories, in front of the upper of which ran a balcony. In the middle was a courtyard for the animals. All round were rooms for the travellers, or for stowing grain, or for stables for the horses. As I walked across to my room from the coffee-house the caravans were very busy settling down for the night. Mules were being curry-combed, their heads deep in their feeds, their heels ready for the unwary; camels squatted hunched up, ruckling and munching; while the muleteers or camel-men, ragged and unkempt, staggered to and fro with fodder, or chaffered in high-pitched screaming voices. Through half-open doors I could see well-to-do travellers—fat bearded pilgrims returning from Kerbela maybe—squatting on

piles of carpets, their *narghilehs* and *samovars* before them.

My room was of the ordinary type, bare as the palm of your hand, mud floored, mud walled. My camp bed had been left in India by a careless servant when packing, so Mohammed had annexed two benches from the coffee-house whereon to lay my valise. Here I ate my evening meal of stewed chicken, dates, and native bread; here by the dim light of my candle lamp I wrote up my diary for the day; and here finally I strapped myself into my valise and slept as one of the Seven Sleepers, notwithstanding the hardness of the couch.

The journey which I proposed was as follows: From Baghdad I purposed to travel north-east to Kirkook by way of Deli-Abbas and Kifri, or Salahiyeh, as it is called now; from Kirkook to Suleimaniyeh, from there to Kifri, and from there to Baghdad, via Gurfa—a circular trail, leading nowhere, but traversing in its compass caravan tracks both great and small, so that on returning bearing one's sheaves with one—to the extent of some four hundred and fifty miles—one would have a shrewd idea of what travel was like in Turkey in Asia. And in any event—

> There's nothing under heaven so blue
> That's fairly worth the travelling to.

It is the road that one travels for, not its end—the pilgrimages that one remembers, when the shrines are forgotten.

Next morning we were up betimes and, travelling without incident, reached Bakuba, the next halting-place. Here it was pleasant, with a flowing river and

thick palm groves rustling in the breeze, and Mohammed would have had us stay there. Now, I was paying for my caravan at the rate of two mejidies, or about a lawyer's fee, six and eightpence, per diem. And though I was quite willing to pay for my own moods of laziness, and stop days in places if the fit took me, I had all the objection in the world to pay for other people's, and stop hours. So I gave the fiat that the march would be continued, and the more Mohammed grumbled and protested that the next stage was *baed, baed* (far, far), the more determined I naturally became to traverse that farness.

So we fared forth, and rode the long afternoon over flat grassy lands, pleasant to the sight after the sparseness of the sandy tracks between Baghdad and Bakuba, and even as Mohammed had foretold the setting sun found us still upon the road. Low it sank behind a palm grove, flushing the sky, and filling the plain with creeping shadows. Evening mists arose and mingled with the scattered smokes of Bedouin encampments. The flush left the sky, and the far horizon line gleamed thinly red, darkly defining the sentinel palms. The cries of unseen herdsmen driving home their flocks came faintly to our ears from the gathering darkness, then the sun fell, and all around us, the earth slipped swiftly into night.

And surely it is in beautiful, inevitable, simple things like this that the true charm of travel lies, and not in uncertain adventures by the way. Every day the traveller has in fee the promise of the dawn, the rich life of the noonday, the fading panoplies of eve. Every day they come, old as the world itself yet ever with something new, either in themselves,

or in his seeing them with new eyes. And yet they are unrecordable. The traveller cannot pass their joy on to another. The words are not forged to paint one such beautiful simplicity, how much less to distinguish between the subtleties of a thousand.

That night found us in poor quarters, as *khan* Said was not the regular caravan stage, which went through from Bakuba to Deli Abbas, and could only offer us the same accommodation as our horses. Supplies, moreover, seemed to be scanty.

At last, however, a chicken was produced, slain out of my sight, though not altogether out of my hearing, stewed, and eaten ravenously with the inevitable bread and dates. My waterproof sheet was laid in the cleanest—not clean—part of the stable, and my valise being extended I strapped myself into it, clothes and all, minus only boots and coats, it being no occasion for the amenities of civilisation. Then Mohammed brought my tea, steaming hot and fragrant, and I set match to my pipe. The firelight flickered strange shadows on the mud walls and roof beams ; the horses near at hand munched steadily ; a little breeze floated in through the doorway—open, for door there was none—ruffling my hair gently as it passed ; and I would not have exchanged my stable for the most gorgeous mansion in Park Lane. . . .

All the next day we travelled over the same pleasant grasslands, the wide horizon broken only by scattered Bedouin encampments, herds of sheep and goats, and an occasional mound, its insignificant forty feet or so here standing up with all the dignity of Mount Everest. We had left the main caravan route from Persia to Baghdad at Bakuba, and consequently the road, purely



MEMBERS OF MY CARAVAN CROSSING A STREAM ON A RAFT



A BEDOUIN TENT

a courtesy title for a rough track, emptied itself of company. No longer did we move with long, swaying lines of camels, with sheepskin-coated pilgrims from Kerbela, leading bepanniered ponies in which sat their womenfolk discreetly curtained from the gaze of the curious ; with the hubbub and life of an important way. For two hours perhaps we would journey without meeting any save a solitary wayfarer, then far off on the horizon would appear some black dots, disappear into a dip of the ground, emerge again larger and more distinct.

'*Karawan*' (caravan), Hussein would say, with a wave of his hand. Nearer and nearer would they approach, until all of a sudden, so it seemed, they would be upon us, one hundred and fifty, two hundred laden ponies, the leader stepping proudly in the van, his head held high, jangling perhaps a score of bells, the others in the rear making the most of their one apiece. So the whole air would be full of their merry chorus, and the rattle of hoofs on stones, and friendly greetings between the two caravans. Then the last loiterer would pass, the track stretch ahead empty as before, a final faint tinkle of their bells reach our ears, and we would be alone again in the silence.

That night we stayed at Deli Abbas, where, the *khans* being full, I slept in a species of store-room, and next day were off with the dawn, for the march was a long one, twenty-seven miles. My escort had been increased, for to-day we were to cross the Jabal (mountains or hills) Hamrin, which do not bear too savoury a reputation, the Kurdish tribes which inhabit them now and then preying upon the travellers.

By this time the character of the people had changed.

We had left behind the Bedouin and began to meet the Kurd. No longer the beringed kerchief drawn over the head, the long *abba*, the clear-cut face. Our fellow-wayfarers wore now small turbans of thick shawls wound round their heads, blue garments curiously like dressing-gowns, and thick sheepskin coats. They had a more uncouth air than the Arabs, with thicker features, and gibbered Kurdish at our escort, who also were of that district. The Jabal Hamrin did not prove very formidable, and we crossed it in a leisurely two hours. All the way we met parties of Kurds—for the most part with the rifle slung on back—driving their small flocks before them. Some of them seemed to eye first my caravan wistfully, and then my escort, with a look that was not all loving. Perchance, but for the latter, they had already divided the spoil. Now and then, coming round a corner, we would see a party seated on a knoll that commanded the road. Then would the escort dig their stirrups into their horses and dash forward with a fine clatter, holding their rifles free in their right hands. I also would loosen my revolver in my holster, in case of accidents. But the supposed brigands would give us a friendly '*Salaam Alaikum!*' (Peace be upon you!) as we passed, and all was well.

At Kartepe—our stage for that day—Mohammed got me a pleasant room on the upper storey of the *khan*, from which I could view the country-side, and at sunset it was curious to see the flocks coming in from all points of the compass, whose centre was the town—at first moving smudges on the far pastures, then distinguishable units on the brown tracks leading through the green, finally a jostling, black and white woolly

mass, following with much maa-ing their shepherds in the street beneath my feet.

Next day I remember as one of the most enjoyable of the stages. We started over rolling downs—for all the world like those of Salisbury Plain—with good, rich grass—for we had now entered the fertile uplands —covered with flocks of grazing sheep. And we had just topped a rise, when lo ! of a sudden to the north-east rose on the horizon snow mountains, so beautiful, so serene, so unexpected, that they came in the form of a shock, tightening my hand on the reins, and bringing an exclamation to my lips, while all around stretched the empty spaces, with the wind blowing fresh and chill from the snow.

The whole of that day—

> 'Twas bent beneath, and blue above,
> 'Twas nodding grass, and naked sky.

So that for the very joy of living I would press my horse into a gallop, and tear down some long slope, or burst into song. And at evening we reached Salahiyeh.

To me, standing amid my bales in the *khan*, approached the Good Samaritan. He introduced himself as G—— Effendi, an Armenian clerk employed in the administration of the Ottoman Debt. The English Consul at Mosul had frequently stayed with him when on tour, and would I give him the pleasure of doing the same by me ? I was delighted, and said so. A comfortable house was an improvement on a *khan*, a pleasant interlude of the road not by any manner of means to be refused. So he took me to his home, where I was introduced to Madam Mina his wife

—they were Christians, hence the introduction—and to the Lady of the House, Zakhea, aged one year and two months. When we had had dinner, seated cross-legged on the ground round a tray bearing not less than half a dozen choices of delightful indigestibles, Zakhea played with her mother, while G—— Effendi and I smoked, each in our separate corner of the divan. And they seemed so happy, this little Christian family in the midst of a Moslem town, so contented, that I could almost find it in my heart to envy them; or more accurately to envy what they stood for. Even for a rolling-stone like myself a fixed habitation with the etceteras thereof was not without its attractions. There were other things in life besides the open road, I reflected, as I lighted a fresh cigarette . . . at which point I decided it was time to go to bed. The mood passed, of course, swept away by the first breath of dawn taken in the saddle next morning. But it occurred, and so I have put it on record.

The next day we reached Duz Khurmutli, and two days later the town of Kirkook, picturesque with half its high-walled houses and minarets perched on a hill, looking from a distance like a great castle, and connected with the lower half—nestling mid palms—by a long bridge over a wide stony bed; this latter now dry, save for shallow streams, but after a month, when the snow melted, to become a rushing torrent. Here, by virtue of letters patent given me by G—— Effendi, I stayed with relations of his, and not merely that night but the day following also.

Our journey from henceforth until we reached Salahiyeh once more by way of Suleimaniyeh was to be off the beaten track. The semicircle led to

nowhere. Caravans went to Suleimaniyeh, but they were small ones, and the track was bad, even for pack-animals. So we were informed, but undismayed we set forth.

Our informants were correct when they said the track was bad. It was stony, it was steep, in parts it overhung precipices—it was in fact all that a caravan route should not be.

However, we had our reward. If travelling on the plain is easy, a dead level to the sky-line becomes monotonous in time. But here! Once over the first pass and we could see stretching before us rolling green downs, then a greenish-brown sea of small hills, breaking wave upon wave against the sheer range beyond, while o'ertopping these again were the snow mountains.

That evening we rested in a Kurdish hut, for the village where we stopped possessed no *khan*. A fire was lighted in the middle of the floor, the smoke, after nearly stifling me, escaped through a diminutive hole in the roof, and the whole party of us—villagers, escort, and travellers—waited hungrily for our food. At length it was brought—great tin trays covered with 'chupatties,' on which were mountains of rice, and wooden bowls of butter-milk. After the meal we one and all disposed ourselves for the night. My valise was unrolled in the warmest corner, somewhat apart from the others, a token of respect for my Effendi-ship; the others wrapped themselves in their blankets and lay where they had sat, the escort hugging close their rifles, which never left them day or night. The dying embers hissed gently and played grotesque shadow-tricks with the recumbent figures. I reflected that

wayfaring, as well as misery, could make one acquainted with strange bed-fellows, and fell asleep.

Next day the frost crackled crisply under our horses' feet as we started, and I was glad of my great cloak of camel-skin, purchased in Baghdad, for we were ascending with every step we took. We crossed the last of the rolling downs, entered the sea of little hills—seen from so many miles back on our journey of the previous day—scrambled through them, and made for the cliffs in front.

Half-past five that evening found us riding over rolling downs again, with the hills behind us. In front far away across the plain I could see a dark blotch through my glasses—Suleimaniyeh—while beyond it towered the snow mountains.

Then arose the question as to whether we would halt for the night at a village near by or press on to Suleimaniyeh. We had been on the road since 8 A.M. Suleimaniyeh was about two hours distant, which meant an hour's march in the dark. I hesitated, and finally plumped for going forward. In for a penny, in for a pound, and the road seemed good—comparatively.

So we rode somewhat wearily forward, while the setting sun cast our shadows long upon the grass, and tipped the snows with the delicate pink of a blush on a woman's cheek. The sun sank, night came with a chill wind and breaking stars, and we stumbled on with tightened reins, keeping close to the blurred figure of our next ahead. At length came the barking of dogs, the flare of lights, and not long after we clattered through the bazaars of Suleimaniyeh.

Suleimaniyeh was disappointing. As the furthest

limit of my desultory pilgrimage, it ought to have proved picturesque, something out of the ordinary, something to match the snow mountains behind it. But, quite otherwise, it shrank from observation in a large hollow in the ground. Its people, too, were altogether given over to their barbarous Kurdish language, so that I could rarely find one to understand me, addressing them in Arabic. There was in fact but one thing which claimed my attention in Suleimaniyeh, and that was the track out of it to the north. Zigzagging up towards the snows, I could follow it with my glasses, and, when it disappeared from view over the mountain-tops, with the glasses of the imagination, as it wound ever northward through Persia, until it reached the land of the Muscovite, where doubtless it became a carriage-road, and so lost half its interest. 'Some day,' I thought to myself, 'I must go and see if this is so.'

But in the meantime it was a case of a return to Baghdad, not of a trip to Caucasia, and after a day in Suleimaniyeh my caravan once more took the road southward.

A scrambling march followed, over a stony track which crossed the first range of the Kara Dagh, and at two o'clock we halted at a village for the day.

There was no *khan* in the village—we were, as I have said, well away from the main caravan routes—so we enjoyed the hospitality of the chief man. Enjoyed his hospitality, that is, in theory; in practice, Mohammed, in my name, pressed something into his hand the next morning, as he had done between Kirkook and Suleimaniyeh on a similar occasion.

That night was an uncomfortable one. There were

other living things present besides human beings—small, but in great numbers, and incredibly voracious. I had had a nodding acquaintance with these eaters of human flesh since my start, and being hardened by a residence in India had escaped almost scot-free. But here—ye gods and little fishes ! So I spent an uneasy, dozing night, tossing from side to side, being slowly devoured alive ; and scarcely had the square of light at the door changed from black to grey before I was up, had collected my caravan, and had shaken off the dust of my feet from that unpleasant place.

Our landmark for the first hour or so was a great cleft in the hills in front of us. Steering by this, we made our way over the customary foothills, and as we went the sky became overcast. The wind blew in eddying gusts, drops of rain began to patter on the stones, and great clouds descended and rolled over the cliff ahead, until it loomed dark and menacing like the gate of Avernus itself.

Nor did its entrance belie what lay beyond—a narrow valley, clothed with black, leafless, stunted trees, with the track climbing upwards on the other side, to be finally lost in the sombre mists above.

Soon we ourselves essayed the heights. My horse stumbled on the steep stony track, and the blinding clouds encompassed me from my companions, so that soon I moved alone, the one living thing in that dead world. It was bitterly cold, here and there patches of snow stood out in dazzling white against the surrounding gloom, and the moaning wind pierced me like a knife, treating as naught my thick cloak. The whole hillside seemed to lament for its desolation, knowing not that in a short two months the kindly

spring would melt the snow and clothe its nakedness with green.

So we groped our way across, and half-way down the other side were free of the clouds; and lo! far below stretched to the horizon the level grasslands bathed in the noonday sun, but still up above the clouds hung dark over the pass.

Notwithstanding the remonstrances of my escort —who wished to make a halt at a village near by—I insisted on pushing forward. So we rode over flat country, and evening found us still *baed, baed* from the next stage. Gloomily the escort prophesied a night spent in the open, consequent upon my obstinacy in endeavouring to accomplish two stages in one day, contrary to all custom. Moreover, under cover of darkness *haramis* (robbers) would doubtless attack us, and we would be slain one and all. Having worked artistically up to this point and seeing me perfectly unmoved, the chief of the escort suddenly announced that there ought to be a village near by, if it hadn't been removed—where, if God willed, we might find shelter for the night. I didn't understand how a village might take wings unto itself until, turning sharply up a steep path, we topped a rise, and there, cunningly concealed in a little hollow, was a Kurdish encampment—a dozen long black tents—all agog at our sudden appearance. The children ran screaming, the women stood at their tent doors divided between curiosity and fear, while the men hastily appeared, rifles in hand, ready to welcome or repel, as the case might be. As for us, the escort laid their rifles ostentatiously across their saddles, and after a few minutes' conversation with the men, made for the largest tent,

that apparently of the Sheikh, where we stopped, dismounted, and went inside.

The tent was a large one, about twenty feet long by fifteen broad, and was divided into various compartments all the way down by means of matting partitions. The walls of the tent itself were also made of matting, or in some places of packed, dried grass, to the height of about five and a half feet. From the top of this the tent itself, its texture black by long exposure to the sun and wind, sloped up to a height of about seven feet, where it was supported by poles placed at intervals down the middle.

On first entering I had turned to the right, but the shrill expostulation of women's voices and a tug at my sleeve announced the fact that at that side was the harem—or what passes for that institution among the free Kurds. So I made my way to the other end of the tent, where, in complete contrast to his ragged owners, and appearing incongruously large in that small space, was a fine upstanding horse, sleek and well-groomed, mnnching his evening feed. An improvised manger of matting held fodder in one corner; a saddle, some large ornamented stirrup irons, and other odds and ends were in the second; and in the third I took my seat on a pile of rugs.

I sighed contentedly as I stretched my legs, a little stiff after the day's riding. Without a doubt these were the 'black booths of the Bedouin,' albeit inhabited by Kurds, of which I had so often read but never entered up to now. Even down to the horse stabled in the corner the details were complete. It was in abodes like this that Doughty sheltered, taking his life in his hand, for a long two years; that

Palgrave in the guise of a Syrian merchant enjoyed desert hospitality; that every traveller in Arabia Deserta has made mention of.

I had had enough of *khans* and villages, but here was something new, something not yet experienced, all the more acceptable because not arranged for, coming as a happy chance of the road, and I blessed my obstinacy of the morning which had brought us to it.

The Sheikh came in gravely and saluted us courteously, while his son, a merry-looking lad of about eighteen, proceeded to kindle a fire, for the evening drew in chilly. As, however, they spoke no Arabic save a few words of salutation and the like, our converse was limited to smiles and signs. The women and girls hurried in and out of the tent door, preparing the evening meal for the strangers; and pretty girls they were, moreover—all Kurdish women, you must know, have a reputation for beauty—tall and slim, fair as many a European, with well-cut features and great dark eyes. As the sun set I heard a confused murmur approaching, and soon sheep and goats streamed past the door—the flocks returning from the pasture—and the whole camp was filled with their bleatings. A boy, blithe and light-footed, his shepherd's crook in his hand, entered the tent, accompanied by a little maiden. All day long they had been out with the flocks, and now had brought them safely home again. A cheerful greeting met them as they came in, and the boy made what I judged to be a report of some sort to the Sheikh, who listened attentively, and at the end signified his approval with a word of praise, whereat the lad blushed with pleasure.

How good it all was, this simple pastoral lodging!

Here amid these nomad folks, in their free airy tents, with their simple straightforward courtesy, I felt peculiarly at home. I even let myself dream, absurdly enough, of adopting their way of life . . . marrying one of their womenfolk—that girl with the laughing eyes, for instance, who let them stray now and then in my direction—accumulating flocks and herds and . . .

My meditations were interrupted by the arrival of the evening meal—a rich mutton and rice stew. While we ate it I was conscious of a subdued whispering and giggling behind my back, and looking round perceived that the womenfolk had collected in a little group and were watching me interestedly. Doubtless I was the first European they had seen. Among the tent-dwellers, whether in Arabia or in Kurdistan, the Mohammedan custom which restricts its womenfolk to a life behind the veil is relaxed, and they move about freely, unveiled, and mixing with the men, though with certain limitations. Thus they eat by themselves, are not supposed to converse with the male sex outside their family, and are consequently more or less in seclusion when a stranger is present. Even these restrictions are more a matter of loose convention than any strict custom, and, unlike the laws of the Medes and Persians, are frequently broken.

After dinner the curiosity of the womenfolk became a little more embarrassing: the minxes would see the stranger into his bed. They scanned my valise and sleeping-bag with wondering eyes, then directed their gaze on me, whereupon the Sheikh's son turned and drove them off, with much shrill squeaking. But I had hardly taken off my right boot when again I heard

those feminine giggles and whisperings, and looking up, behold! there they were once more, but reinforced this time, apparently, with a contingent from half the camp. It was useless to attempt to frustrate them. They had evidently determined not to miss any of the antics gone through by this strange being whom fate had brought to their camp. The Sheikh turned to me and made a gesture with a shrug of his shoulders as of man appealing to man against the vagaries of the Sex. I nodded sympathisingly, and continued my toilet, shortening it, however, to ridding myself of my boots and coat. I am no shyer than one here and there, but not for all the gold in Asia would I have continued my disrobing any further before that battery of criticising, unabashed, entirely feminine eyes. . . .

After a long but uneventful march, in the late evening of the following day we were once more in Salahiyeh, where once again I shared the hospitality of G—— Effendi. The Lady of the House appeared to have grown perceptibly older even in the short time I had been away, and greeted me gravely by raising her small hand to her head, in a manner that delighted her proud parents as much as it did me.

But at Salahiyeh I had perforce to change my plans. My original intention had been, as may be remembered, to return to Baghdad by a place called Gurfa. Fair and clear ran the caravan route on the map, but on inquiring at Salahiyeh anent this route I was informed that it had been disused for some little while, and bore a bad reputation by reason of robbers. Well, like the 'cat who walked by himself,' all ways were alike to me, and since to return by Deli Abbas would have been old ground, I determined to regain Baghdad

by way of Khanikin and Bakuba, by which route up to Bakuba at all events would be new.

We reached Khanikin in an easy two days, the only event to break the monotony of the plain being the crossing of a small river, which we accomplished on a *khalag*. This form of conveyance is a raft supported on inflated skins, and of an antiquity stretching back into the mists of time.

At Khanikin we joined the main caravan route from Persia to Baghdad once more, and moved in company with long caravans of camels, horses, and mules, and pilgrims bound for Kerbela carrying their dead with them. For it is the custom of the Shiah sect of Islam to bury their dead, if possible, at the shrine of Kerbela. So down come the caravans bearing their gruesome burdens from all the wide land of Persia —the stronghold of the Shiahs—from Ispahan, Shiraz, Teheran, or even far-off Meshed.

From Khanikin to Baghdad was an orderly tally of regular marches from flat horizon to flat horizon, its monotony only broken by the come and go of the road. Again we reached Bakuba, once more Beni Said, and two hours later saw far away a blurred mass of palm trees with here and there a minaret against the grey sky. Baghdad was in sight!

CHAPTER V

BAGHDAD TO PALMYRA

NOT long after my return from Suleimaniyeh I proceeded to carry out my intention of moving on to Damascus, a journey of some twenty-six days. So one March morning found me leaving Baghdad with my caravan—travelling light, with but three horses in all—my proposed route being Kerbela, Hit, Der, Tadmor, Homs, Bealbeck. But, as will be seen, this itinerary was to be observed in the breach rather than in the observance.

On my arrival at Kerbela, the great shrine of the Shiah sect of the Mohammedans, I was unable to procure an escort to take me direct across the desert to Hit: water was scarce, the Bedouins were on the war-path. So I had perforce to double back on my tracks and make for a place called Ramadi on the Euphrates, two days' journey below Hit. From Ramadi I passed on to Hit, where I fell in with F——, of *The Times*, whom I had seen before in Baghdad, and whom I had agreed to meet on the road, as we were both travellers for Damascus. From Hit we journeyed up the Euphrates along the usual route, whipped by the *howa-al-ajuz* (the wind of the old woman), as the Arabs call it, which blows every year for a short time just at this season. So travelling from

khan to *khan*, in due course we reached a little village called Abu Kamal—you may or may not find it on your map—where, for all its unimportance, the unexpected stood in ambush for me.

For here my journey took a different aspect, and by the course of events I was snatched from my caravan and the beaten track and pitchforked into the desert with a single Bedouin guide. Thus:

A glance at the map will show that by going straight across the desert to Tadmor instead of round by Deir we would shorten our journey considerably, and before arriving at Abu Kamal we had determined to make this short cut. On reaching Abu Kamal, however, we found difficulties in the way. The caravan track from Abu Kamal to Tadmor marked on our map, if it had ever existed in reality, certainly did so no longer, the track of country lying between Abu Kamal and Tadmor being desert pure and simple, inhabited solely by the wandering Bedouin. Water was scarce too, and the sites of the infrequent wells known only to the tribesmen. Altogether an impossible route for a caravan.

But, the first disappointment at this piece of news over, the idea came to me that what was out of the question for a caravan might well be possible for a single traveller who could ride far and fast, and who would offer but little temptation for plunder to any Bedouin met with—indeed might even lay claim by his defencelessness to their traditional hospitality.

It is perhaps hardly necessary to add that the further idea came to me that this solitary hard-riding wayfarer should be myself. I was tired of the *Darb-us-Sultan* (the King's highway), and an unending

succession of unclean *khans*. I wished, moreover, to see something, even if a very little, of the open desert, and this trip across it would fulfil that desire.

So I broached the idea to F—— that he should take the caravan road by Deir, that I should proceed straight across the desert, and that we should meet at Tadmor, the first to arrive to wait for the other. F—— was willing, and it only remained for me to obtain a *dalil* (guide).

But it was just in this matter of the *dalil* that my difficulties lay. He would have to possess an intimate knowledge of the desert between Abu Kamal and Tadmor, belong to one of the tribes which roamed this area in order to ensure us a good reception at their hands, and above all be trustworthy. And this paragon of *dalils* would have to be found in less than twenty-four hours, as we were off on the morrow.

By a piece of good fortune I got in touch with a merchant of the village—a Christian as it happened—and he, being a person of influence, at length procured me a Bedouin who agreed to take me to Tadmor across the *chol* (desert) for a specified sum, the said sum to be deposited with the merchant and to be delivered to my *dalil* on his return from Tadmor with a letter from me.

But this treaty was not made without many sittings. At last, however, it was concluded, the merchant, as court of arbitration, summing up the situation.

'Effendi, Nayal (the *dalil*) is your *wajhak*, that is to say your surety with his life against harm to you from the Bedouins, and for guiding you in safety from here to Tadmor. And you must know, Effendi, that when an Arab has sworn to be *wajhak* for anyone, he stands to it with his life,

in act as well as word. Well,' turning to the Bedouin, 'do you agree?'

'Aye,' said Nayal, extending a sinewy hand which I gripped in mine, 'W'Allahe, t'Allah B'Allahe.'

So the treaty was signed, more binding I trusted at the time than some treaties written on parchment.

As for the risk of the journey. In my person little or none unless the very unexpected happened; for my property some, but slight. The Arabs are chary of meddling with Europeans, from the trouble which sometimes ensues. On the other hand, anyone travelling like myself in the desert, without escort, does so at his own risk, and some *ghazzu* (Bedouin raiding party) might take advantage of this. F—— himself, while travelling near Aleppo some time previously, had been shot at, badly wounded, and robbed, by a Kurdish outlaw.

Altogether it was with a feeling of excitement, half pleasant and half—let me confess—the reverse, that I went to bed that night, realising that when next the hour of sleep arrived I should be far out in the desert.

Since for various reasons I wished my departure on my desert trip to be as inconspicuous as possible, I had planned to leave with my caravan in the ordinary manner the next morning, and then to flit away with my *dalil*.

In pursuance of this object my *dalil* and I started a little ahead of the others, and about half a mile from the village reached a mound by the roadside, with a little hollow nestling behind it—the very concealment for my purpose. In a trice I had ridden behind it, had dismounted, and was casting Europe from me in the shape of my Norfolk jacket and riding-breeches, while embracing the Arab East with its flowing *abba*

(cloak), voluminous shirt with long full sleeves, and beringed kerchief drawn over the head. A chilly metamorphosis, too, I can assure you, that March morning, in the coldest hour of the twenty-four which comes just at dawn.

My reason for adopting Bedouin dress was not that I hoped to pass as an Arab at close quarters, but that at a distance, or even at casual meetings when much converse was not required, my garb would be sufficient to carry the deception off.

As I dressed we heard the caravan approach with a jingle of bells and sound of voices, pass and die away in the distance. Scarcely had it done so when two seeming Bedouins rode out of the hollow and headed straight for the open west at a sharp trot, with the empty sky above and the empty desert around—apparently the only living, moving things in the great world.

And since we were destined to travel in this desert world, we were not unprovided with the wherewithal to sustain existence.

In our saddle-bags were dates and bread, Bedouin fare, sufficient for five days. Hanging to my saddle were two *kirbas* (small leather water-skins), while a *matarea* (large water-skin of the same material) squelched against the side of Nayal's mount. My blankets for the night, including a waterproof sheet, were placed beneath us, divided equally. This was at once an easy and comfortable way of carrying them, as we both bestrode native pack-saddles, with the addition in my case of stirrups taken from my English one.

And what of the Bedouin, that unlettered wanderer of the wastes, now become for me the most important

personage in the strange world into which I had plunged? Short was Nayal, and slightly built, with an open countenance and a pleasant smile that revealed a row of beautiful teeth. Indeed, had I not liked his face and trusted him instinctively from the first, I would have been very far from putting myself so completely in his hands, had all the Christian merchants from Stamboul to Bushire testified in his favour, for once in the desert I was as dependent on him as he would have been on me in the streets of London.

I have used the word desert, but it must be understood that there are deserts and deserts in Arabia. There is the terrible Rub-el-Khali (the Abode of Emptiness), which no man has ever crossed, where there is no life of beast or bird; there are the sands of the Nafud, which guard the emirships of Nejd, traversed even by the Bedouins themselves in safety only at certain seasons of the year; and there are the deserts—like the North Syrian—so called merely because they grow no single acre of crops or contain a single house. Over such lay our path, over scanty grass, and desert flowers, and rolling downs.

After some five hours' riding we reached wells. Themselves life in the desert, they presented a desolate contrast to the green around. The grass had been killed by the trampling of many feet, and a ring of bare sand extended on which were fire-blackened stones, charred sticks, and odds and ends of frayed garments. The wells were shallow holes in the earth, their water stagnant and slightly salt, so that the horses, when it was poured out for them in the little troughs built for that purpose by the Bedouins, sniffed at it, dissatisfied, and drank only a

few mouthfuls. Nevertheless, it was the only water for man or beast, so we drank of it ourselves—Nayal with relish, I as one taking medicine—and filled our water-skins. For all that they present so poor a satisfaction to the senses, whether of taste or smell, wells are *the* important factor in the desert. Feuds between the various Bedouins not uncommonly begin with a dispute over water, and once fighting has commenced he who holds the wells has his hand on his enemy's throat.

Here also Nayal and I took our first meal together—dates and bread—squatting on the ground by our tethered horses. Then we readjusted our saddle-bags and rode away.

That evening we sighted a Bedouin encampment—half a dozen black tents, surrounded on the horizon by flocks of sheep and goats—and here Nayal proposed we should stay the night. Repressing as best I could my apprehensions as to the nature of our, or rather my, reception, I followed him with what confidence I could summon up.

A little group of men were seated outside the biggest tent, whom we greeted—after the Arab fashion—with 'Salaam Alaikum!' (Peace be unto you!). 'Walekum as-Salaam!' (And on you be peace!) they replied, and then when we had dismounted and taken our seats, 'Marhubba!' (Welcome!). Such is the 'How-do-you-do' of the desert.

The fact that I was English did not occasion the surprise I had expected. This was doubtless due to the fact that English travellers are by far the most frequent anywhere in the Middle East, and that one of them should wander a little off the beaten track in

Bedouin guise they doubtless attributed to the incomprehensible vagaries of the Western mind. For the rest, their bearing was kindly, but their interest chiefly centred in my *dalil*, who could give them the latest news—for even the desert has its gossip.

Where did the So-and-so pitch their tents in these days ? Had Nayal seen Such-a-one, the son of Such-a-one, lately ? Above all, how did the great Anazeh tribe move ?—north, south, east or west ?

Their eagerness on this latter point was soon explained. They themselves, unlike my guide, were not the Anazeh, but on the contray a small tribe on which the Anazeh preyed, taking off their flocks and herds.

I was by no means loth thus to play second fiddle, as it were, to my guide, since it gave me an opportunity of observing my hosts. My host-in-chief, whom I judged to be sheikh of the tribe, was middle-aged, very fair-looking for an Arab, not unhandsome, but with a shifty expression which I did not wholly like. Instead of the *abba* he wore a long, English-looking coat, which at once proclaimed him not quite the Simon Pure, for no sheikh of a big tribe would so Westernise himself. The others, whose exact relationship to the sheikh I could not quite determine, were a youth—a walking arsenal of cartridge-belts—a pleasant-faced man with a dark beard, and an old greybeard whose only contributions to the conversation were cackles of senile laughter.

Presently the setting sun brought the flocks in, and soon the air was filled with their clamour and the guiding shouts of the shepherds. The twenty or so camels which belonged to the tribe also came to rest, and there was heard from time to time a harsh con-

tented gurgle as the ungainly beasts sank on the ground one by one and fell to chewing the cud.

The shepherds, long staffs in their hands, joined our circle, and the evening meal was prepared. *Leban* (sour curds—in Persia called *mast*), a sort of cream cheese, and barley bread were our portion, and may it never be my fate to have worse. The *leban* and cheese were placed in bowls, the bread in slabs around; we used the knives and forks which nature had given us, and the devil took the hindmost, who was not the Christian of the party. After the meal we had gathered round the fire, when said Abdul Aziz—such was the sheikh called—'*Ya* (O) Fehal' (this was their Arabic interpretation of my name); 'have you a pistol?'

'Yes; O Abdul Aziz,' I answered foolishly and without thinking.

'Then will you show it?'

I could not well refuse, and handed it across.

'It is a good pistol, but not as good as mine; see!'

I saw quite well that mine was the superior weapon, but—

'Yes, it is a good weapon, and perhaps is better than mine.'

'Then will you make a *darghaish* (exchange)?'

'Nay, I do not wish to rob you.'

The sheikh laughed, and the incident passed, but not without further unpleasant consequences, as will be seen.

Anon the idea came to me that instead of departing on the morrow I would stay with these people another day. I was in no hurry. I would in any case arrive in Tadmor before my caravan, and I might as well take the opportunity of seeing as much as possible

of Bedouin life. So I suggested it through Nayal, and it was well received.

This being agreed upon, I announced my intention of retiring for the night. Nayal spread my bedding in a corner of the tent, and making a pillow of my saddle-bags, and placing my revolver under my pillow, I rolled myself well into my blankets, for the night was chilly, and presently fell asleep.

Next morning, at sunrise, when I awoke the camp was all a bustle, for the Bedouin were to move to another ground. The men hastily swallowed some *leban* and bread, and fell to loading or striking tents. These tents are not really tents in our sense of the word, pyramid-shaped and of regular appearance. They are in fact more ' booths ' than tents, oblong in shape, six feet high perhaps, of goat's hair turned by long exposure to sun and rain pitch-black. They are but a feeble protection against the elements, for many a tear lets in the sun's heat in summer, the rain and wind in winter. Down the centre there is a partition—or if the tent be a large one, perhaps two—which divides the men's from the women's quarters.

While superintending the breaking of camp the sheikh found time to hail me across the hubbub :

' *Ya* Fehal ; may your morning be fortunate ! '

' And may God make your morning fortunate ! '

' See, Fehal,' coming towards me ; ' anent that matter of the pistol. Come, now ; make an exchange.'

' But I have already said that I do not wish to rob you.'

' Nay, I am willing to take the risk. But we will talk of the matter later ' ; and there was a tone

in his voice which seemed to take away, for me, some of the freshness and joy of the morning. It was not so much that I objected to the exchange in itself, though mine was the superior weapon, but I judged it would be merely the beginning of other polite depredations. Already Abdul Aziz had peremptorily exchanged an old water-skin of his for a new one of mine, and I had pretended to acquiesce willingly in this piece of petty knavery, but revolvers were a different matter, and decidedly a long step in the wrong direction.

At length the business of breaking camp was finished, and, Nayal bringing up my horses, we mounted and rode off. We horsemen, about half a dozen in number, went ahead, our robes fluttering in the breeze. Behind came the donkeys and camels, loaded with tents and bundles, and behind them again moved slowly the flocks and herds, spread fanwise over the plain, grazing as they went.

Soon we reached the wells, where the precious water was placed in skins for personal use, and the thirsty animals were watered. Then again we set out and after some two hours reached the camping-ground, for the Bedouins do not camp on water, but within easy distance of it, and Abdul Aziz cantered ahead to choose the exact site. To me anywhere in the vast plain would have seemed suitable, but doubtless to the Bedouin eye there were subtle differences. Where he halted there was to be the camp, and when this at length occurred there ensued the minor point of the situation of each tent. Finally this also was arranged, and each horseman, lord of a tattered booth, rode off to superintend its pitching, and within an

hour there were the same six black booths, the same groups of men moving in and out, and dotted here and there, far away on the horizon, the same flocks and herds as had marked the camp of the evening before.

The camp pitched, and a meal of dates and *leban* disposed of, the sheikh had leisure to give his time to me and to the acquirement of that thrice accursed revolver.

'*Ya* Fehal; wilt thou not exchange pistols?'

'*Ya* Abdul Aziz; thine is the better weapon. Moreover (happy thought!), the cartridges for my pistol cannot be obtained in this country.'

'Have you no more with you than those in the pistol? None in your saddle-bags?'

'Only half a dozen.'

His face fell.

'No matter, I shall be able to get them in Halab (Aleppo), or perhaps Baghdad.'

'I am sure that that will be impossible.'

'Then the loss is mine. Come, now, Fehal, and make the exchange.'

And so it went on, half-hour after half-hour. You, if ever you have been in a position like mine—hostilely questioned by some one in whose complete power you were—will appreciate my feelings. You will know how I longed to lose my temper and tell him and his d—d piece of ironmongery to go to the devil, and you will also realise how foolish such an explosion would have been.

The climax came some time in the early afternoon. Abdul Aziz entered the tent where I happened to be sitting, and addressed me in that loud blustering tone which I had begun to learn heralded a demand for the *darghaish*.

'*Ya* Fehal; I am going to take that pistol from you to-night.'

Whatever my outward composure may or may not have been, inwardly I felt that damnable sinking sensation at the pit of the stomach which ordinary mortals feel when face to face with a sudden danger.

'Yes, Fehal; I am going to take that pistol from you to-night,' and he advanced his sneering face close to mine.

'Then I won't give it to you.'

'What! You won't give it to me?'

'No!'

The buttons were off the foils with a vengeance, and if the sheikh's face had been dark before, it grew ten times blacker at this. An outbreak was imminent, but with a manifest effort he checked himself, and proceeded in a milder tone:

'See here, Fehal; the Anazeh, as you know, rob us and take away our sheep, and our goats, and our camels, and even our household goods. We have heard that to-night they will make an attack upon us. I wish, therefore, to give one of my shepherds your revolver for the night, so that he will be able to defend himself properly.'

I knew what that meant, of course. When the morrow came 'the shepherd had been attacked in the night by those *haramis* (robbers) of Anazeh, and my revolver taken from him'; or 'some camels had strayed, the shepherd had gone after them, and would not be back for some days'; or merely a flat statement that possession was nine-tenths of the law.

I managed to profess a polite interest in the mis-

doings of the Anazeh, and the storm blew over for the time.

As soon as was possible I escaped into the open air. I felt I could face the situation better there than in the confined tent. But the open spaces, and the wind blowing free and unchecked from horizon to horizon, and the blue sky above—all so pleasant to me this time yesterday—had lost their savour. I would have exchanged them all for the dirtiest of London's mean streets.

And what was this situation which I had come out to face? Abdul Aziz had said that he was going to take my revolver from me that night. I saw no reason why he should not keep his word. It was true that I had defied him, but this, in poker parlance, was the weakest of weak 'bluffs,' and if he chose to 'see' me, in other words, to take it from me by force, the game was his. And if he took my revolver, why not my horses, my saddle-bags, the little money I had on me? Other and grimmer possibilities also hung about nebulously in the back of my mind—possibilities which my reason refused stoutly, but which my imagination weakly entertained.

You, reading this in your Club, perhaps, with the roar of police-regulated traffic in your ears, I, writing it, far removed from Abdul Aziz and all his works, may perhaps think that at the time I exaggerated the situation—made a mountain, if not out of a mole-hill, at any rate out of a very ordinary hill. But unfortunately—or perchance fortunately, for our pleasures as well as our pains depend on the circumstance—no event appears to us as it really is, but distorted by our senses, which take colour from our surroundings. So

I can assure you, my dear sir, sitting in that easy-chair, smoking that good cigar, and you my other self, smugly censorious now that you have won to safety, that in the open desert things wear a very different aspect to what they do five minutes' walk from a post-office.

The afternoon merged slowly into evening, each hour laden with its burden of unpleasant anticipations; the sun set, the flocks came in, the evening meal was served. Still Abdul Aziz made no sign.

I referred to my departure on the morrow.

'No, *W'Allah*, Fehal; you must not go to-morrow. Behold, everything that is mine is yours. What do you desire? A camel? a sheep? a horse? Take what you will when you depart, but it must not be to-morrow. We do not let our guests leave us so quickly.'

'I am very grateful to you, O Sheikh, but I must go. I have already stayed one day with you, and Tadmor is far from here.'

'Tadmor is close, quite close. Go the day after to-morrow, and you will arrive in good time before your caravan.'

I did not press the question. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, and the morrow could look after itself.

Night drew in. We gathered round the fire which crackled in front of the sheikh's tent.

Presently I said that I would sleep, and who so solicitous as Abdul Aziz? Had I enough blankets? With his own hands did he arrange my bedding. *B'Illah*, but this was very good, this bag for sleeping in. But my belt? Was I not going to take off my belt? My belt held my revolver.

No; I would keep it on.

I felt his hand pass lightly over my body, and turned as if to compose myself to sleep. The sheikh seemed to hesitate a minute—surely that minute held double its complement of threescore seconds—then turned and went. I heard his voice join the circle around the fire, and drew a long breath. My 'bluff' had come off.

I shivered in the dawn next morning as I made my simple toilet, and went out to warm myself at the fire, round which already crouched the Bedouins. In silence, save for a greeting given and returned, I watched the sun rise, then, turning to Abdul Aziz:

'I fear I shall have to start soon.'

'Start soon, O Fehal? No, *W'Allah*. To-day you must stay with us. We move a short distance upon your road. To-morrow, *in sha Allah*, you can leave us.'

'But the way is long.'

'Long? No, but short. To-day you must stay with us.'

Under ordinary circumstances I should have had no objection; in fact, I should have welcomed an opportunity of another twenty-four hours with the Bedouins. But as it was, if ever I have wanted anything badly in my life, it was to get away from my kind host, Abdul Aziz. I knew perfectly well that I could never hold out another day against his importunities. Before nightfall the revolver would be his; and after that the deluge!

I got together all my Arabic to meet the situation.

'O Abdul Aziz, listen to my words. What is

this that you are doing? I am your guest. I am your friend. I have eaten your bread, and drunk your water. For two days I have lived in your tent. Yet first you trouble me to exchange my revolver with yours, when you know right well I wish for no such exchange; and second, when I propose to depart, you put obstacles in my way. Is this right from a sheikh to his guest?'

It was my trump card—it was my only card, and a sufficiently poor one at that, but it took the trick. Abdul Aziz reddened and looked stupid; a murmur of approval ran round the little circle. If the Bedouin sometimes fall away in practice from their ideal of hospitality, in theory and in speech they cling very closely to it, and I think it flattered them that a stranger and an Englishman should appeal thus confidently to their code of honour.

'Nay, nay, Fehal,' apologised Abdul Aziz; 'I meant nothing save that we Bedouins like not our guests to leave us in a hurry. Go your way in peace.'

'Nayal,' I said, 'bring the horses.'

Until they were brought I wrapt myself in a haughty silence. I knew that my harangue would only have a temporary effect, but I trusted that it would last long enough to enable me to effect my retreat. And so it proved; but only just that and no more. For at the end of a long hour the sheikh had already recovered his Bedouin assurance, and was once again throwing out hints anent that bone of contention—my revolver. But at the end of an hour also my horses were ready saddled at the tent-door.

Then came the delicate question of payment for my stay. Had Abdul Aziz been a bigger sheikh any

offer of board and lodging would have been an insult ; had he been a smaller, *backshish* would certainly have been expected. I solved the problem by giving him my pipe, a large calabash in which he had already displayed considerable interest, filling it liberally with my tobacco, and passing it round the circle of his cronies after the manner of a *narghileh*. This gift, moreover, was a diplomatic move, which I hoped would tie his hands had he any lingering designs on my property. For having accepted a present from me—and he could not well refuse it—surely very shame would prevent him from troubling me further.

With a '*Fi Aman Illah*' (In the guardianship of God) to their '*Audana kum*' (We trust you to God), a handshake and look in the eyes for the sheikh, in which I endeavoured to express my exact opinion of him and his hospitality, we rode off.

So closed the incident. But if ever you wander in Turkish Arabia and come across a shifty-looking sheikh smoking a large calabash pipe, you will know that this is none other than Abdul Aziz, and you will be wiser than I and not show him your revolver. Further, if you are in a position to do so—which I was not—will you kindly inform him from me that he is no true sheikh, and a d—d scoundrel to boot, or he would not wear an English-looking coat and try to rob his guests ? After this tell him that Fehal, who stayed in his tents for two days in one month of March, has written in a book a full account of the kindly and courteous treatment he received, so that the name of Abdul Aziz has become a byword and a reproach in all *Feringhistan,* and men spit on the ground when they mention him.

All that day we rode through the desert, stopping at wells once; and the wind blowing free and unchecked from horizon to horizon, and the empty spaces around, and the blue sky above me had recovered all their charm. I felt as if I had waked from a nightmare, and hummed snatches of song as I went.

Three or four times we saw men far away. That is, Nayal's keen sight picked them up immediately, and mine, once I knew in what direction to look, followed suit. My sight, in comparison to Europeans, is not slow, but naturally enough a tortoise to the eagle gaze of the Bedouin. There are, however, two circumstances which greatly aid them in picking up objects quickly. First, any black speck on the horizon must almost certainly be a living thing or a tent, for there are no trees in the desert and few rocks, at any rate in the North Syrian part of it. It will not be a sheep, for that has not the requisite height to show up clearly against the sky. It *may* be a wandering camel, but the pace at which it moves will decide whether this is so, or whether it is a horseman. Second, everything which rises above the surface of the desert must sooner or later silhouette itself without background against the sky-line.

Whenever we saw these specks we generally made a detour to avoid them. It was one thing to seek hospitality from the Bedouin in his camp, another to meet a wandering band in the open. Sometimes my *dalil* would stand upon his horse, and from this vantage scan the horizon. Then descending he would strike his bare heels into the chestnut's sides and trot off to the right or left, as the case might be.

'*Haramis*,' he would grunt. Apparently in the

chol a man is presumed to be guilty until he has proved himself innocent. 'Ride on this side of me, Fehal, then we shall only appear as one to them.'

Sometimes Nayal would check his horse, dismount, and dig the tether-pin into a little mound with thin curious cracks across it. Anon would come forth a whitish object something the size of an apple. This was that expensive luxury, a truffle, for which gourmets in Europe pay high prices. But the Bedouins call it *kama*, or sometimes *bint-ul-Rad* (daughter of thunder), connecting it in one of their superstitions with the after-effects of storms, and get it free by the exertion of a little manual labour.

That evening we came within sight of some black stationary specks, which Nayal said were tents, and where he proposed sheltering for the night. I cannot say that I hailed this proposal with any particular satisfaction after my experience with Abdul Aziz, but I reflected that it would be a very hard and unlikely fortune to meet two of his breed in so short a time, so shoved my revolver to the bottom of my saddle-bag and followed Nayal.

The tents were deserted save for some women and children, the men being out tending the flocks and digging for the 'daughters of thunder.' Nayal unloaded the horses and laid my bedding on the ground in front of a tent ; it would not, apparently, have been etiquette for me to have entered it in the absence of the men.

'*Ya bint* (O daughter),' said I to the woman standing at the door, 'may I have a little water? I am thirsty?'

'Water? Will you not then drink *leban*?' And

going into the tent she came forth with a large bowl of that delicious liquid fit for the gods.

'Drink,' she said, smiling kindly, 'and take your rest. You must be weary.'

Now why had I a feeling that all this had happened before ? Where had I solicited water from a Bedouin woman and been given *leban* ? Not in this existence, I could swear to that. Or perhaps I had read some vivid account of such an incident. Perhaps . . . perhaps . . . then all of a sudden I remembered—I knew.

> He asked water, and she gave him milk ; she brought forth butter in a lordly dish.

Sisera and Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, and that 'butter in a lordly dish'—none other than *leban*, whatever the learned commentators may state—all passed before my mind.

On just such an evening did the weary captain of the hosts of Jabin—that morning lord of nine hundred chariots, at sundown a fugitive on foot—come to the tents of Heber the Kenite, where Jael awaited him with words of welcome, and *leban*, and at the finish the hammer and the nail. And since his fate was upon him, could he have 'obtained release' more pleasantly than with the sweet taste of the curds upon his lips and the lost fortunes of the day mercifully closed in sleep ?

Like Sisera, I also stretched out my tired limbs—Jael's prototype might nail my head to the ground with the tether-pin for aught I cared—and slumbered.

Unlike Sisera, I awoke not in the next, but in this

very world, to find ‘ Jael ’ bending over me—but with no hammer in her hand.

‘ Look ! The men are returning from the pastures,’ she said. ‘ The evening meal is prepared. Enter into our tent.’

All this brings the Bedouin woman rather into prominence—a prominence which unfortunately she does not adorn. The ‘ Bedouin maid ’ in fiction and poetry may be a figure of romance. In real life, as I have seen her, trudging behind some caravan and assisting with shrill screams and blows to hasten the pace of the tired animals, or gathering firewood from the desert bushes around some Arab encampment, she is very far from being romantic. Poor soul, she is not lovely—the hardships of the desert, doubly hard for women, have taken care of that ; and she is not clean—if there be barely enough water for drinking, whence can come the wherewithal for washing ? Maid or matron, young or old, she leads a hard, a bitterly hard, existence, knowing the pinch of hunger daily—she sups on her menfolks’ leavings—the stabs of thirst not rarely. She is not the household drudge, because she is denied a house, but that of the tent—far worse—the tent which fails to protect her from the biting blast in winter, and the fiery heat in summer. So the lean years have their will of her, and soon—far sooner than her sister of the city—she becomes old, her life holding naught else save the hewing of wood and the drawing of water. And then a little time, and she has found ‘ the great palace of Magnificent Death,’ and her poor old body is laid to rest in the desert which has treated her so hardly.

They were poor people, our Bedouin hosts,

wretchedly poor, so I had no scruples next morning in offering payment for their hospitality, and pressed some pieces of silver into the nearest child's hand—the most gracious way of doing what is after all a rather ungracious act, however much it may have to be appreciated.

The next day—the fourth from Abu Kurnal—passed as the previous one had done, except that we came upon no wells. Twice or thrice we saw flocks of sheep and goats, and as we were now well in the Anazeh country, moreover in that particular section from which Nayal came, we would ride towards them, our procedure being as follows:—While we were still far away Nayal would strike up some Bedouin ditty, to signify, I suppose, that we had no intention of a stealthy surprise. The shepherd, rifle in hand, would advance to meet us, when Nayal would dismount and walk up to him. Keeping his piercing gaze full upon him, watching his every movement as a cat does that of a mouse, the shepherd would suffer his approach. Not until Nayal was quite close, and this scrutiny had proved satisfactory, would the shepherd release his vigilance, when they would embrace and, squatting down, commence a Bedouin gossip. From myself, as one of less importance, was expected merely a 'Salaam Alaikum,' but before departing, by the good offices of Nayal, I generally obtained a bowl of milk, warm, pure, and refreshing.

That night we were to bivouac in the open, no sheltering encampment lying on our path, but first came the evening meal. So Nayal built a small fire from the desert bushes, cooked some truffles thereon,

produced bread and dates, and sat himself down opposite me. And as we ate the sun sank.

Desert lore prescribes that one should eat one's evening meal before dark, when one's fire is less likely to be observed, and then move on an hour or so for the night bivouac. Even if one's smoke has been sighted, and too curious inquirers approach, they find but blackened ashes, while the friendly night has covered one's departure.

It was after our meal that I discovered that I had not yet done with Abdul Aziz. You will remember that he had high-handedly exchanged an old water-skin of his for a new one of mine. Hitherto I had had no occasion to drink from his, as my two small ones had proved sufficient, but now these had run dry, and Nayal tilting up one end of the *materca*, I put my mouth to the other.

Ugh! the filthy, yellow, evil-smelling concoction that trickled slowly forth, grateful for the moment because of its chill, but thereafter nauseating and abominable.

I am not very well acquainted with the technicalities of water-skins, but I have learnt that the goat- or sheep-skin of which they are made has to undergo a species of curing before being fit for holding drinking water. Either this particular skin had never undergone the required process, or extreme old age had played the deuce with its inside. In any case, what had been put into it as *water* came out as sewage, and my two horses, Nayal, and the open desert heard a specimen of English speech which I trust was not altogether inadequate to the occasion. Also, if there be any virtue in cursing, Abdul Aziz was a sorry man that night.

It was, however, no good crying over spilt milk, or bad water, so we mounted our horses and rode forward another hour under the full moon, when we halted for the night.

The horses were unloaded, tethered, and left to graze. My waterproof sheet was unrolled upon the ground, and my blankets were spread on top—half for myself, half for Nayal ; and then side by side, the Mohammedan and the Christian, the Arab and the Englishman, bound together—I liked to think—by something more than a promised sum of money, by that link which binds together all travellers on the Open Road, east or west, we lay down with the sky for a roof. And what a splendid thing it is to sleep thus under the stars ; to gaze upwards, not into the stuffy darkness of a room, but through infinite space, where the numberless night-lights of heaven twinkle so kindly and calmly upon you ; to feel the light touch of a breeze on your forehead ; to hear the tired earth sigh and turn in her sleep ; at one with the great Cosmos, to be near the solving of many mysteries, and then—lest you should unriddle them —to have your eyes gently closed ! . . .

Up with the dawn the next morning, we travelled hard till noon, when an obstacle more powerful than the most inaccessible of mountains forced us to turn our steps—thirst. For though desert travelling seems so easy, so smooth, so untrammelled, he—King Thirst—moves always with you, a little out of your sight ; and as your water-skins empty he draws nearer and nearer, until, with the last drop finished, he strides across your path, imperiously bids you draw rein, and asks with a mocking smile : 'Whither away now ?' And you

know the answer, which you give humbly enough: 'To the nearest water.'

So it was with us. My horses had been without water for over thirty-six hours, I myself—save for a few mouthfuls of that yellow abomination already alluded to—for over twenty. From where we were to the nearest water on the Tadmor line direct, Nayal said was eight hours' hard riding, but he seemed to be doubtful of even that. On the other hand, he knew of wells some two hours to the north.

We turned northward.

At the wells I had hoped for a short rest, but it was not to be. The Bedouins, as I have said, are jealous about their water, and we were now in territory belonging to a section of the Anazeh which was at feud with Nayal's. So our movements, far from being leisurely, were characterised by extreme haste. Our bucket was unloosed and water drawn for ourselves, for our horses, and for our water-skins, with the same anxious speed, the same searching glances round the horizon. At length the watering was finished; our water-skins, but lately so limp, now squelched pleasantly against the horses' sides, and we rode off free of the desert once more.

That night we met a party of merchants with their sheep, their horses, their goats, and their camels, travelling to Damascus, with an armed escort, and stayed the night with them. The next day we struck the *darb-us-Sultan*, by the side of which I again became of the West—western by virtue of apparel produced from my saddle-bags—and halted the same night in a small hamlet, once thriving, now for the most part in ruins, having been sacked—so the few remaining

inhabitants told us—by the Anazeh. The Bedouins, however, could not 'lift' the spring of the place, which contained delicious soft water free from impurity—nectar after what I had had to drink in the desert—and of which I took exorbitant toll, lying on my stomach to gulp it down for whole minutes together.

The day following we saw the ancient burial towers of Palmyra stand up against the sky.

CHAPTER VI

PALMYRA TO DAMASCUS

THE best asset, I suppose, which a traveller can carry with him, next to a well-filled purse, is an orthodox sense of appreciation. With such a sense he is never disappointed at what he may meet on his road. When his guide-book tells him that he is to be 'interested,' or 'amazed,' or 'struck with the loveliness around him,' he *is* so, and proceeds on his way rejoicing. But there are some people, hard of heart and understanding, who cannot for the life of them order their emotions so conveniently. The thing must take them in the mood, or they are frankly bored.

For instance, when the orthodox traveller sees Babylon, he is properly impressed. He feels that here was one of the cradles of the human race; here great peoples, nations, and languages have had their day and gone. He is something of an archæologist, well learned in the ancient histories, so 'glorious guilty Babylon' means a good deal more to him than a pile of old stones. But when I saw Babylon I merely *felt* hungry, ravenously hungry, cold—there was a biting wind blowing—and somewhat weary. I had ridden far. There being nothing of majestic superstructure to catch my ignorant eye—Babylon of to-day lies in excavations—it wandered off to the

spaces around, where it saw something which was at the moment infinitely more to its taste—the open desert lying bare beneath the setting sun.

So much for Babylon! And I had an uneasy idea that perhaps Palmyra might prove the same. But it was not so. For here were large columns, tall pillars, gateways, arches, walls, porticoes, and what not; while beyond a great pile heaved itself massively into the sky. Here was something to see!—something grand and beautiful which even the most ignorant, like myself, could stand before and worship.

What impresses one most at Palmyra is that subtle trick of Nature's—contrast. Here, in the midst of the desert, where you might expect a miserable hamlet, you are confronted with the wreck of a mighty city. You know it is going to be there, yet you rub your eyes. You are as much surprised as if you came across a piece of desert set down in the midst of Piccadilly. It has the same incongruity. This sense of surprise stays with you, moreover. You are continually being pulled up with a jerk, and find yourself looking in wonder from the barren hills and the lifeless desert to the magnificent relics of life around you. There seems something inhuman about the choice of such a site for such a city, notwithstanding the plausible explanation of the guide-book as to trade centres and so forth; but it was not until I came to Damascus that I found that such was actually the *case*. For, as says an Arabic writer whose record I chanced upon there:

So God said to Suleiman, the Son of David, 'Go to the desert, and there collect an army of the Jinns, for I have given them permission to build Tamor.' [Tamor, Tadmor, and Palmyra are all one and the same.]

The Bible is rather more reticent on the subject, the author of Kings merely remarking, 'And Solomon built Tamor in the wilderness.' Doubtless he too was in the secret of its supernatural construction, but very naturally did not wish to emphasise the fact that the great and good king was in any way connected with the Black Arts. For myself, having seen with my own eyes Tamor and its wilderness, I intend to adhere to my Arabian authority until I shall receive direct proof to the contrary.

From my childhood up I had connected the two cities of Babylon and Palmyra each with a famous character—to wit, Nebuchadnezzar and Zenobia. The former, of course, from its scriptural connection, the latter I really don't know why or wherefore, except that I have a vague idea that somebody or other wrote a poem, 'Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra.' I am sure that I never read the poem, but that was of little account, the name in itself, with its fine rhythms and its sense of the romantic unknown, being worth many poems to me.

As for Nebuchadnezzar, that grass-eating monarch, I never felt any particular interest either in him or his harsh-sounding name. The only piece of poetry I remember where he is concerned was one dating from the time of my early schooldays. It began, 'Nebuchadnezzar, the king of the Jews'; the rest I have forgotten, except that the second line ended with 'shoes,' and as far as I recollect it was not complimentary to that great ruler.

But Zenobia the Queen, wrapped as much in the alluring mantle of her sex as of her sovereignty, to her I doffed my hat.

Nor in this need I be deemed unduly impressionable. Even the stolid Gibbon—he 'who sighed as a lover, but obeyed as a son'—has caught the glamour of the great queen, and actually devotes some of his solemn periods to a description of her charms: her pearly white teeth, her sparkling black eyes, 'tempered by the most attractive sweetness,' and the like.

And he is no less lavish in his praise of her as queen than as woman. How in Palmyra she mourned and avenged the death of her gallant husband, Odeinathus; how her imperious will proceeded to follow, even more gloriously, in his footsteps, until her soft woman's hand gripped firmly and justly strange peoples from the land of the Pharaohs to the banks of the Tigris; how finally she swept forth with a flash of spears to do battle with Aurelian for the Empire of the East; and how she animated her people to a desperate resistance in the siege of her capital which followed the lost fortunes of that day—all this glows in the pages of *The Decline and Fall*. But why, oh why, with an altered mind must we read a few pages on?:

> The courage of Zenobia [this when in the hands of the enemy] 'deserted her in the hour of trial; she trembled at the angry clamours of the soldiers, who called aloud for her immediate execution, forgot the generous despair of Cleopatra, which she had proposed as her model, and ignominiously purchased life by the sacrifice of her fame and her friends. It was to their counsels, which governed the weakness of her sex, that she imputed the guilt of her obstinate resistance; it was on their heads that she directed the vengeance of the cruel Aurelian.

So she purchased her life; and later still, after they

had led her in golden chains through the streets of Rome at Aurelian's triumph, what do we see ?

> The Emperor presented Zenobia with an elegant villa at Tibur, about twenty miles from the capital ; and the Syrian queen insensibly sank into a Roman matron. . . .

Ye gods, what bathos ! A ' Roman matron,' occupying the smug respectability of an ' elegant villa ' !

Oh ! great and conscientious narrator, could you not, even for once only, have neglected your meticulous authorities, and, blushing as a historian but dissembling as a man, have manufactured for us some ending to the story more worthy of you and her ? . . .

Beyond Zenobia, Palmyra held for me the melancholy attraction that all great ruins do for those who gaze upon them.

> They have but fallen before us : for one day we must fall. Why dost thou build the hall, son of the winged days ? Thou lookest from thy towers to-day ; yet a few years, and the blast of the desert comes ; it howls in thy empty court, and whistles round thy half-worn shield.

As for them, so for us—some day. Naught left but an ' empty court,' a ' half-worn shield,' an obscure legend, a sight for the rare traveller, a motive for a few paragraphs in his fugitive diary. But though our pomp and circumstance be gone, let us trust at least that our legend will not be unworthy of fame. . . .

During my stay in Tadmor I enjoyed the hospitality of the Sheikh Mohammed, more commonly known as the Sheikh of Tadmor, none other than he who was the Blunts' guide to Hail, North Central Arabia, in 1879. This, of course, I being not uninterested in Arabian exploration, afforded us much ground for conversation.

I informed the sheikh also that I intended to write a small record of my insignificant travels—though only God and the publishers knew whether it would see the light of print—in which I would certainly not forget to mention my host's kindness. So if ever you find yourself at Palmyra, you would do me a kindness by informing the sheikh that I have fulfilled my promise.

F—— came the second day after my arrival, bringing my caravan in tow as well as his own. Nayal left for Abu Kamal to claim his reward from the Christian merchant, and soon after we set out for Homs, from where we were to go to Damascus via Baalbek, purposing, like Ulysses of old, 'many things which the gods had determined should not come to pass.'

Our caravan was now of some little size. First there was F——, with two horses and two mules, his dragoman Shamoo, and his muleteers; then there was myself, with three horses, my servant and muleteer; there was also a Baghdadi clerk, with his aunt, who had attached himself to our cortege in order to travel to Damascus in greater security. These latter had between them two horses and a donkey, and the way the old lady would sit out the longest and coldest day, perched up cross-legged on her pack-saddle, was a thing to marvel at. Besides these, the permanent members of the caravan, we would often pick up chance wayfarers, either riding or walking, who would accompany us for a stage or two. Thus we made quite an important jingle and commotion as we bustled along.

At a place called Ain-el-Baitha, half a day from Tadmor, where the road branches off to Damascus or Homs, we were obliged to take the former, though we had intended taking the latter. First we were

unable to procure an escort for the latter road, though one was available for the former; and second, our muleteers more or less flatly refused to take the Homs road. It is true that by a show of force we could have compelled the muleteers to take whatever road we liked, but as there was some doubt in their contracts with us as to whether they were strictly bound to take the Homs road—which was indeed not the direct one to Damascus—we were unwilling to do this. And so, after much argle-bargling and unpleasantness and time wasted, we took the Damascus road direct and gave up our idea of Homs.

From this incident it will be seen that travel in the East is not all a path of roses. The very freedom, unexpectedness, and charm of the picturesque which it has over Western travel bring their disadvantages. The wayfarer in the East deals with elemental, uncertain factors: horses instead of trains, men instead of obsequious officials, foodstuffs in the raw in place of station buffets, uncertain wells—few and far between—instead of taps with hot and cold laid on, robbers who make unsafe the King's highway; and his travelling will be successful or unsuccessful, a pleasure or a continuous worry, according as he has *savoir-faire* to deal with these factors. In the West I am almost inclined to say there is no travelling proper—unless indeed it be on foot, well away from the railway line—only touring. For there the journey is made for the traveller; in the East he makes his own. In the West you pay a certain sum of money, and lo! there are hundreds of officials, chosen by other people, who are your most obedient servants to help you on your way; there are scores of trains, with the working of which

you are blissfully unconcerned, to carry you swiftly and luxuriously whither you will ; there are hotels and refreshment-rooms from which, at a word, you obtain the soft couch and the well-cooked meals which you desire ; you are as a child in the hands of many considerate nurses.

But in the East—unless, indeed, you cling to the beaten ways—everything depends upon yourself. You propose a journey. Is the time of year suitable for the country which you propose to traverse ? It is. Then you must set to work to get your caravan together. Will you have mules or horses ? The former are better for hills, the latter for plains. Will you hire your animals, and so incur a certain expense, or buy them on the chance of selling them at your destination ? In the latter case you run the risk of mishaps to them on the road, and selling them at a loss when your journey is finished. Then what is the state of the horse market, as far as you can ascertain, at your destination ? The animals are brought for your inspection. Do they look up to the mark ? You imagine they do, but the price, buying or hiring, is ridiculous. You must set to work to beat down the dealer. He will not come down beyond a certain price. Will you risk a ' bluff,' and send him away in the hope that he will come back with a lower offer—which should he not do, you may go further and fare worse—or will you clinch the bargain, and afterwards find to your mortification that you could have made a better one elsewhere ? How many animals can you cut down your caravan to ? Every additional animal means additional expense ; on the other hand, to take too few and overload them is rank folly. You make

your final arrangements and start. After a few days you suspect your horses are being underfed and that your muleteer is pocketing the difference. This must be seen to. You wish to go by a certain road. Your servant, primed by the muleteers, swears by all he holds sacred that there is no water or fodder on that way. From independent inquiries you have to ascertain whether this is the truth or not. The *khan-chis* along your route want a certain amount for your night's lodging. You have once and for all to decide how much will uphold your dignity as a Frank, and how much is mere throwing away of good money. You see that your servants are quarrelling among themselves. As a final court of appeal, you must so arrange matters that their differences are diplomatically adjusted. For when retainers fall out, matters go not smoothly for the master. You can turn two short stages into one by a forced march, but will your animals stand it? And so *ad infinitum.*

But even if a traveller be never so capable, there are times of vexation of body and spirit when he finds himself confronted by the inertia, the hostility, or the greed of the East. And at such times if he cannot borrow something from the East itself—something of its easy fatalism, something of its calm philosophy—to soothe in part his mind, he had better not leave his railway lines and his hotels.

I have mentioned the wearisome side of Eastern travel, because, in most of the books of travel which I have had the pleasure of reading, this reverse of the medal is not mentioned. And it was only from experience of my own that I realised that such a side existed at all.

That night we took shelter in an Arab encampment. The Der-Damascus road being not much used, the *khans* are few and far between, and we were still far from Khareatein, our next halting-place. The women were singularly free of bearing, even for Bedouins, and as they made *leban* in great water-skins, chaffed merrily enough with F—— and myself. On our solicitations two of them even agreed to come with us! When it came to the point of departure I noticed that these two lost their gaiety and became silent and nervous. Their men were away from the tent, and I imagine they thought we were quite capable of carrying them off across our saddle-bows *nolentes volentes.*

We were attacked by Bedouins about 11 A.M. on the next day, and this was the manner of it.

Very early, earlier even than usual, had we started from the Bedouin camp that morning, and by eleven o'clock must have been eight hours on the road. There was a cold wind blowing, and I was walking, in the endeavour to restore circulation to my limbs. Some way behind the caravan came F——, riding. Our escort, who were supposed to guard us with their lives, had disappeared on ahead and had not been seen for the last hour or so. Such was the disposition of our forces.

Suddenly I was aware of three men who, mixed up with the caravan, were demanding *khubz, khubz* (bread, bread), in a rather more threatening manner than seemed to agree with their statement that they were poor and hungry. Indeed, when I came to observe these gentry closer I noticed that, poor as they were, one was armed with a pistol, one with a

sword, and the third with a stick. There was obviously but one thing to do—to produce some armament of war on my side.

My pistol, instead of being in my pocket as it should have been, was in my saddle-bag. Luckily, however, the enemy gave me plenty of time to run to my animal and get out my Webley. The production of this, I imagined, might scare the Bedouins off, but they belonged to too hardy a race, and were too accustomed to war, for anything of the kind.

They drew away from the caravan; that was something, but for the rest they stubbornly refused to leave the field of battle, and as an answer to my levelling my revolver at *them*, the pistol man—a negro, by the way—levelled his weapon at *me*. At this point they received reinforcement in the shape of an ally armed with a stick, who apparently shot up out of the ground, for I never saw him walk up.

So there we were, manœuvring hither and thither, neither side caring to commence hostilities—I for a reason which will appear later, the Bedouins because they do not care much about assaulting Franks, whose consuls always make such a fuss on their behalf. Every minute that they refrained from absolute attack was so much gain to me. The caravan —the object of their solicitude—was drawing farther and farther away, and F—— was coming up from the rear. I calculated that when he rode up, off would go the *ghazzu* (raiding party), and the affair would be over. But it was not to end so easily as that.

In the intervals of covering the Bedouins with my revolver, I signalled and halloed to F—— to come up and take them from the rear. But the wind, as I have

said, was high, so my voice failed to reach him. We were, moreover, in a straight line from him, as he told me afterwards, and bunched up all together, so he was unable to see what was happening, or in fact that anything was happening at all.

So there we continued—the four Bedouins, myself, and Shamoo, who, though unarmed, very pluckily stayed with me, quartering the ground in a sort of grotesque lancers.

I do not know whether you have ever covered a man with your pistol in earnest. I trust you have never done it in play. But if you have not, when you do—unless it is a case of covering and firing at the same instant—I think you will find a kind of unreality about the affair. You will find it hard to realise that you hold the life of a fellow-creature under your finger, that you have only to press it gently, and the man facing you, at that moment full of strong life, will the next be a dead lump of flesh at your feet.

At least, looking back on my sensation, that is what I felt. I could hardly bring myself to believe that this was all real; that these four men were truly robbers, only held at a safe distance by the shining barrel of my Webley; that it might possibly come to a pinch where, if I didn't kill them, they would kill me. For the rest, I felt no particular anger against them.

In fact, if I had thought for a minute that they would have been contented with a few loaves of bread, I would have given it to them and told them to go in peace; but I knew very well that the bread was only a 'test case,' to see what sort of spirit we were made of, and what sort of resistance we would show.

The Bedouins began to encourage themselves with

the ancient war-cries of Islam: *Ya Allah!* (O God!), *La Illaha Illala, Mohammed Russul-Ullah* (There is no God but God, and Mohammed is the prophet of God). They also began to use Nature's artillery—stones, and a shower of these latter came flying about our ears. I heard a grunt from Shamoo, and he wrung his hand.

The Bedouins had drawn first blood. But for all their stones, it was the negro with the pistol whom I kept my eye on. He was the only one of the *ghazzu* who could slay from a distance. However, from the way he held his revolver I could see either that he was not much acquainted with its use, or that he had no intention of using it seriously—just then. And it was only with 'just then' that I was concerned: the future minutes could look after themselves.

Nevertheless, things were becoming serious, and again I halloed and gesticulated to F——. This time, to my great relief, I saw him ride rapidly forward. So did the Bedouins, and began to retreat. It remained but for us to turn the retreat into a rout, and the day was ours. Shamoo and I raised a warlike shout between us and pursued hotly.

Bang, went my revolver. I had fired over the enemy's heads. Bang, the negro had replied at random, but they broke into a run nevertheless. Again we yelled; the Bedouins ran. Victory was ours. But the Bedouins did not propose to give up the day so easily. There might still be time—so they evidently thought—to depart, if not with the honours of war, at any rate with loot, which was the same thing to them.

So, suddenly rallying their forces, they attacked, and it was our turn for the manœuvre which has been immortalised by Xenophon. Stones again came

hurtling about our ears. Bang, bang, went the enemy's artillery, and bang once more. I thanked the gods that the son of Ham appeared to be an atrociously bad shot.

The Bedouins slackened their pursuit. I looked over my shoulder, and saw the cause. One of my horses, which I had bought in Baghdad for the road, with the intention of selling it in Damascus, had fallen into their hands. My servant had been riding it, and, although armed with a Derringer which I had given him, had apparently made no effort to protect his mount, but had got off, left it, and sped after the caravan.

Here was a nice kettle of fish. My chestnut, my hard-earned pounds, my prospect of gain in Dimishq—where horses are dearer than in Baghdad—my well-filled saddle-bags, all in danger of being ridden off with by these thieving rogues! One of them had the chestnut by the head-rope. By Allah! he was preparing to mount. It was now or never. I ran back upon them.

The would-be thief let go the head-rope when he saw me approach, and retreated. I caught the head-rope with my left hand and levelled my revolver with my right. The four closed in upon me. There was no more unreality about the affair now: it was grim business, and I shot with the faithful intention of killing.

That I did not succeed must be put down to my bad aim. They were ten yards off. I pulled the trigger, picking off the negro. Bang!

A miss at seven yards. Bang! I whirled round, and discharged my pistol point-blank at one of the stick-men who had come up in rear. A palpable writhe

told that at any rate this shot had gone home—somewhere. I pulled the trigger again ; there was a dull click.

The Bedouins raised a yell of triumph, and the second stick-man was upon me, and had struck me on the right arm and shoulder twice in quick succession. Indeed, the quickness of the blows defeated their own object, as they were too light to do any serious damage. Through the hurly-burly I heard the sound of shouting, saw the stick raised again, and the savage, contorted face of the striker. I dodged under the chestnut's neck, turned to fire once more, and then—

There was F——, sitting on his horse near by, opening fire on the Bedouins, who were in full retreat. Phut, phut, phut—his Browning cracked like a whip, and never was any music sweeter to my ears. The cavalry had come up just in time.

But it was not until I opened my revolver to ascertain the cause of the supposed misfire that I saw how close the margin of time had been. Four empty shells fell out on to the ground. I then remembered that I had fired two shots away practising at stones on the road, so when F—— came to my assistance I had exhausted my ammunition.

But this was no time for comments or explanations. We had driven off the Bedouins, it is true, but we had no guarantee that they did not possess friends near at hand—friends with rifles and horses. And if this was so, and they came upon us before we could reach our next halting-place, Khareatein, it was a case of *actum est de nobis*. So the chestnut was hastily reloaded—in the scrimmage various things had fallen off—my servant was reinstated minus the Derringer which had

been so futile in his hands, and which I now took possession of myself in place of my useless revolver, and we hurried the caravan forward at its best pace, with many an anxious look rearward.

Then, and not till then, had we leisure to discuss the affair and I to give my thanks—to F—— for saving me a probable journey across the Styx, and to Shamoo for his pluck in voluntarily sharing with me the risk of such an encounter.

'Well, yes, Shamoo; it was devilish plucky of you to stay with me like that, unarmed as you were, too. It was very good of you, Shamoo, to stay with me like that, very good, and I shan't forget it.' I haven't either.

'By Jove, yes, Shamoo. You've done very well to-day, very well indeed. You were the only one of the caravan who stuck to Mr. Fowle.' This from F——.

Shamoo's honest face beamed all over.

'How I leave Mr. Fowle? Not possible that, sir. I serve Englishmen ten, twenty, thirty years, and then when little trouble comes I not stick to them? That not possible, sir. I stay with Mr. Fowle, and I shout out to Bedouins that this not ordinary traveller, but English consul—very big consul' (here was promotion indeed!); 'think perhaps then they become afraid. But they not care, sir, consul—no consul. Plenty bad men.'

I think you will agree with me that it was worth travelling far, worth an encounter with the Bedouins, worth even the risk—what shall we say?—of losing a chestnut horse, to meet such a loyal follower as Shamoo, dragoman.

'All the same,' observed F——, 'I wish I had slain one or two of those gentry. It would have been getting my own back for that affair at Aleppo two years ago.'

But as for me, I was quite content with the ending of the affray. For, as I pointed out to F——, if I had killed one of our assailants, self-defence or no self-defence, I should have had an Arab blood-feud on my hands; and a Bedouin blood-feud is, as far as I can judge, just as bitter as a Pathan one, which is saying a good deal. Now F—— was leaving the country for civilised lands where blood-feuds are not; but I, on the contrary, was to be a sojourner in the land for the next four months, perhaps might again wish to travel in the desert, so you may imagine that a blood-feud was the last complication I wished for.

Thus, discussing the affray and hastening forward the while, we caught up our faithful guards, who had deserted us, if you please, to gather grass for their horses. About an hour later we reached Khareatein and rested from our labours. . . .

From Khareatein to Damascus is only a journey of three days, but it is a very interesting three days, as it takes you out of Turkish Arabia into Syria. The change is a pleasant one. The little towns you pass through have an air of cleanness wanting hitherto; the *khans* show the same improvement. After the pale, unhealthy looking children of Baghdad, you are delighted to see rosy-cheeked youngsters playing riotously at the street-corners. And not only do the children hold the monopoly for rosy cheeks. For as you clatter through the streets more than one pretty maiden glances shyly up at you, and you see that her

colouring also is pleasant to the eye. You look your approbation ; perchance you smile. The pink blushes slowly to red in the maiden's cheeks, but slowly also a smile plays about her lips, and you guess that your boldness is not wholly without its pardon. As you ascend the air becomes brisker, colder. Ahead you see a smudge of pure white against the sky : the snowy peaks of the Anti-Lebanon. You turn to your companion and observe, as I did to F——, 'By Jove, we're in a different country altogether.'

At Kuteifeh, one day from Damascus, we celebrated our return to civilisation by hiring a carriage to drive the rest of the way in, leaving our caravan to follow at its leisure. As an act of charity we took the old lady with us, for already she must have suffered much, poor thing.

It was my fortune to enter two of the most Oriental cities of the world—Baghdad and Damascus—in most un-Oriental weather—the former on a bleak windy day, typical of an English autumn, the latter through a Scotch mist, thick as pea-soup and cold as the 'frosty Caucasus.' But presently the mist cleared away, and behold! we were driving through the lovely green gardens, flaked with the pink and white of the apricot blossoms, which are the glory of the Sham-Ash-Sharif (Sham the Honoured), as the Arabs lovingly call Damascus.

CHAPTER VII

A SOJOURN IN SHAM

At Sham F——'s path and mine separated—I to pursue my studies in that city, he bound for London Town via Stamboul.

For that is the way of the road. For a time it and its hazards, and its long hours spent in the saddle riding side by side from dawn till eve, bring you and your companions in close touch with each other; then, the open country crossed where the road is one, and one only, you reach an outpost of civilisation where many highways meet, and they take one and you take another, each upon your own business, and the partnership is dissolved.

My object being the acquirement of Arabic, a house of my own such as I had had in Baghdad was the first desideratum. To have gone to one of the European hotels, where tourists abound and where the waiters talk French or English, would have been to have had no more touch with things Arabic, whilst in it, than if I had resided in any Continental spa. After some little difficulty, for house agents are a luxury which Damascus has not yet indulged in, I procured a suitable residence not far off the Darb-el-Moustaqim, the long bazaar to which two thousand years ago that lion-hearted

traveller, Paul of Tarsus, came groping his way to the house of Judas, that ancient way which is known to all the English-speaking world as 'the street which is called Straight.'

My next necessity was an instructor in the language, that is chiefly on the literary side; for the colloquial I had the three hundred thousand inhabitants of Damascus at my service, or at any rate such of them as I might chance to speak with in the day's round. I was fortunate enough to find a capable instructor in Mr. A. K——, a Syrian Christian; and it was with him that I finally acquired the right pronunciation of the two Arabic letters *h* and *Ain*, which when a European can master he may be said to be at the beginning of knowledge. Mr. A. K—— had been Doughty's teacher in Damascus before that explorer started on his journey into the unknown wastes of Northern Arabia, so I felt I was following in no mean footsteps.

My third need was a 'guide, philosopher, and friend' in the shape of some respectable Moslem who would act as a sort of perambulating professor of Arabic. I wanted some one who would accompany me in my rambles through the bazaars—some one whose knowledge of people and things Damascene would render such rambles doubly interesting; and who so suitable as a Moslem sheikh? [1] I say Moslem because, though the number of Christians in Damascus is by no means small, yet the city is of course a Moslem one, and the first interest of a traveller is to get

[1] The word 'sheikh,' though used generally to denote the chief of a Bedouin tribe, also denotes in Syria any Moslem of respectable position.

into touch with the indigenous people of the country. Moreover in Damascus, as indeed throughout Syria, there is still considerable enmity between the Moslems and the Syrian Christians, and one stood a better chance of receiving a more open welcome if one came under the ægis of a Moslem than of a Christian. After some difficulty—for the affair, as you can imagine, was a somewhat delicate one in consideration of Moslem prejudices—through the good offices of Mr. A. K——, who was held in high respect by the Moslem community, the matter was arranged. Of the sheikh I procured, more anon.

My fourth need was a fez, or tarboosh, whichever you like to call it, and I procured one—of a height and respectability such as would not have disgraced the head of the Sultan himself—for the sum of one medjidie, or about three shillings and fourpence. My object in wearing a fez was of course the same that it had been in Baghdad, i.e. to avoid being pestered by beggars, who invariably expect largesse from anyone wearing a European hat, and to avoid being stared at if I chose to frequent places, such as native eating-houses and cafés, where the European is not often seen.

Thus was my sojourn in Sham completely arranged for. . . .

If you have been in Damascus you probably were of the opinion that one of the most picturesque bits in that city occurs at the end of Straight Street ; but if you have not I should like to describe it to you.

Straight Street itself is a covered bazaar, but at right angles to it runs the uncovered thoroughfare which under one name or another may be said to traverse the whole of Damascus from north to south.



IN A MOSQUE



DERVISHES

The bazaar ends in a great arch, and across the street, in a blaze of light, the delicate proportions of a mosque and minaret are outlined against the blue sky. A few tattered beggars bask in the sunshine outside the mosque door, and the crowd surges in and out of the bazaar. The whole charm of the picture lies in the abrupt contrast between light and shade—a contrast peculiarly characteristic of an Eastern sun—and between the movement of the crowd and the 'still life' of the prostrate beggars. Then, just when you are thinking that never did you see a more typical Oriental setting, an electric tram whizzes round the corner, and with a grinding of brakes comes to a standstill just in front of you, effectually obliterating the beggars and the mosque. To your picturesque sense this is annoying, but to your imaginative and critical sense—which takes some pleasure in noting, and speculating on, the conflicts and differences between the East and the West—the advent of this Behemoth is rather stimulating than otherwise. It also underlines contrasts, though of a different nature from those of the picturesque. . . .

The finest bazaar in Damascus is perhaps the Sùk-el-Arouam (the Bazaar of the Greeks). But it is by no means the most Eastern. Perhaps that is because it is too clean, for in an Eastern city dirt and the picturesque are usually inextricably mixed. It also has a tin roof, which, however useful against the elements, is not artistic. Its shops too for the most part, instead of being the proper old-fashioned holes in the wall, presided over by imperturbable greybeards smoking long *narghilehs*, are large European structures with plate-glass windows, where you are

attended to by shoulder-shrugging, gesticulating young Syrians, very voluble in French. Native cook-shops, old-clothes' shops, emporiums for the sale of carpets and antiques, boot-shops, tailors, and so forth are all found here. Here one can buy curios to take home with one and be well swindled in the process, for the manufacture of *antiqāts* is a flourishing trade among the good people of Sham. Of course you can purchase really good curios at the better-class shops, but then you have to pay really good prices in exchange.

Not having the wherewithal to buy curios, my chief interest in the Sùk-el-Arouam lay in the cook-shops. A native eating-house in the bazaars of Damascus may, to the fastidious, not appear very promising, but I sincerely hope that I shall never fare worse on my travels. The menu is not in writing, but is displayed to the patron's gaze as he enters in large tin dishes heated from below. From one of these dishes he makes his choice, and a portion is served out to him. The fare consists mostly of stews—either meat or vegetable—there being no joints, and curiously enough, as far as my experience went, no curries, notwithstanding the prevalence of that dish in Indian cookery. But sweets play a prominent part in the menu, including the famous cream tarts mentioned in the *Arabian Nights*. Once inside, the place is clean, and fitted with the ordinary imitation marble-topped tables. Knives and forks are provided, and nearly every one uses them. In fact, your seeker after 'local colour' would find it disappointingly civilised.

I used to have nearly all my meals at one of these eating-houses, as I found it a much simpler arrange-

ment than housekeeping for myself. When any of my Moslem friends came to visit me and take a meal in my house, I could always procure the necessary food from the nearest cook-shop.

There are other and humbler native restaurants than the class described above, where the poorer classes resort, and sometimes I would frequent them. Here, according to custom, I would buy my meat from a neighbouring butcher and have it cooked at the eating-house. No knives and forks were provided. One showed one's quality by the skill wherewith one used one's fingers, like Chaucer's lady, who was of such gentility that never did she dip her fingers into the dish above the second joint.

My sheikh, as I shall call him—his name is of no consequence—had a friend who kept a shop at the end of the Sùk-el-Arouam, and in our excursions through the town would often stop there to pass the time of day. The sheikh was a man of letters, the shopkeeper was a shopkeeper, but being both respectable Moslems any idea of social difference never occurred to them. The Moslem East is the only true democracy, and snobbery is still a monopoly of the West. On the merits of my companion I also was made welcome, and taking a seat would watch all Sham pass before my eyes. And as an epitome of types Arabic it was worth watching.

First, as most insistent on one's attention, were the street hawkers, prominent amongst whom were the syrup, lemonade, and liquorice-juice sellers. A narrow strip of white cloth wound round the head; a striped coat gathered in at the waist, where were held the implements of his trade, his trough for holding glasses

and his money-bag ; an apron reaching down to his knees to protect his white pantaloons from stain ; over his shoulder a leather strap to hold his jar of sweet drinkables ; in his hand a couple of brass cups, which he clinked together as he raised his cry—such was the *sharbatli* (seller of sherbet and lemonade).

But if the *sharbatli*—by reason of the brazen aid which his clinking cups gave to his voice—was most heard, the beggar was not far behind him in his clamour. Damascus, like every city of the East, is a happy hunting-ground for the sturdy loafer. Clad in a bundle of dirty rags, this individual peregrinates from bazaar to bazaar, calling upon God and man for relief : 'For the sake of God ! O ye charitable ! I am the guest of God and the Prophet ! My supper must be Thy gift, O Lord ! ' and the like. For the European the cry is generally shortened down to the familiar '*Backshish.*' The retort courteous to this is either '*Allah yaateek !*' (May God give it to you !), or still better, since it is in the nature of a rhyming jest, '*Māafish*' (I have nothing). Beggars there are, to be sure, who are of a truth in a state of beggary. But these poor creatures —the blind, the halt, and the diseased—choose for their 'pitch' some sheltered nook beside a mosque wall, and do not venture into the hubbub of the bazaars.

Then there were the *sakkās* (water-men), carrying their water-skins either upon their backs or upon donkeys ; the sellers of sweetmeats, with tray on head, of vegetables, of truffles—that European delicacy, here common enough in season—of fruit, each with his own peculiar piercing cry.

As for the people in general, they were of all types :

venerable sheikhs in long flowing robes ; poorer citizens in single shirt and pantaloons—these forming the bulk of the crowd ; well-to-do Syrians and Turks in blue suits ; now and then a gorgeous *kawass* from a foreign consulate ; now and then a travel-stained, unkempt Bedouin fresh from the open desert ; and now and then a party of tourists whirling through the crowd in a hired carriage, 'doing' Damascus—that ancient city—in two days.

The shopman would break in on my meditations.

'Say now, *Beg*, for what purpose have you come to our city ? Speak openly : we three are friends.'

'Why, to learn Arabic. Where can one learn better Arabic than in Sham-ash-Sharif ? '

'*W'Allah !* That is true. But have you no other purpose ? '

'To travel, to see new peoples and strange places.'

'To travel ? Only ? ' His smile would express polite unbelief.

The sheikh : 'In truth the Englezi think of nothing but *safar* (travel), *saied* (sport), and,' with a sly glance at me, '*seāsat* (politics).'

'Ay ! *B'Illah !* That is a good saying. *Safar, saied*, and *seāsat*' ; and the shopman would chuckle approvingly to himself.

The truth is that somehow or other we English have a great reputation for a crafty foreign policy all through the Middle East, and the Oriental, not understanding the 'call of the road,' puts every traveller down as a political emissary. . . .

I have already remarked that I would make further mention of my sheikh ; and, indeed, it needs no great effort of memory, even now, to call to mind his

personality. Invariably dressed in the most spotless of flowing garments, with well-shaped hands and long tapering fingers that would have been the delight of an artist, his face grey-bearded and commonly grave but now and then relaxed into a kindly smile, his deportment that of a Mohammedan gentleman—than whom no better exists—his whole presence brought with it an atmosphere of benign dignity.

Nor did his character belie his outward man. Our conversation, carried on at first for the practice of my Arabic, soon widened into long discussions and arguments *ad infinitum*. And whatever the subject on hand—politics, or metaphysics, or morals and manners—I always found a spirit tolerant and full of goodwill towards its fellow-creatures, a mind steeped in Arabic learning, and an understanding shrewd and acute; yet with this shrewdness there was a touch of simplicity which I found very attractive.

The sheikh was of the old school, and while tolerant of innovations, had no very great faith in them.

'You know how our proverb goes, *Beg*?—"The borrowed cloak never warms." New-fangled notions and customs from the West are for us of the East all borrowed cloaks. They are not based on the hearts of the people. They may suit you Englez—though you too have your political troubles, have you not? But they will not suit us.' . . .

One of the quarters in Damascus most suggestive to imagination was perhaps the Sûk Souroudjieh (the Bazaar of the Saddlers). Here there came to you, as it were, a whiff of the open desert in the midst of the crowded city. For here were all necessaries for desert wayfaring: high-peaked native saddles, coloured,

striped, and betasselled ; cartridge-, pistol-, and money-belts ; embroidered girths, and martingales of woven wool ; heel-ropes, camel-bags, and water-skins, large and small. Here maybe to buy outfit for the road came the Englishmen, Palgrave and Doughty ; Huber, the ill-fated Frenchman ; Nolde, the soldier of fortune and the other brave adventurers who have made Damascus the starting-point of their explorations [1] ; but whether this was so or not, here at any rate comes he to whom the desert is not a hazardous venture, but his hearth and home—namely, the Bedouin.

The Bedouin for the most part sticks to his native wilds, but now and again he comes into town to buy and sell, or on pleasure bent. Some of the smaller Bedouin tribes are only partly nomadic. They till land on the edge of the deserts and keep great flocks of sheep. These tribes have constant intercourse with Damascus, and trade in camels and horses, which they breed extensively. They are, however, despised by the desert tribes, who say that they are not the true Ahl-Ash-Shadar (People of the Tents), and who harry them whenever opportunity offers.

Some sheikhs also, even of the big tribes, own property round about Sham, and keep agents there to look after their interests. So any day of the year, but especially in the summer-time, when the tribes have to seek the more fertile regions in search of water, you will meet many Bedouins in your walks through the bazaars. Generally rather short, and of wiry rather

[1] And since the time of these well-known travellers, possibly L—— also, a brother officer, whose wanderings in Northern and Central Arabia are worthy to be compared with the exploits of any of the above.

than strong build, his dress makes the Bedouin appear taller than he really is. The Pathan, as he walks through Peshawar on a day when a caravan has come down the Khyber, and the city is all agog, is a sight to have seen. But nevertheless in picturesqueness he is second to the Bedouin, with his *abba* swinging voluminously from his shoulder at every stride, his *kafeea* dropping down like some gorget of old on either side of his weather-beaten cheeks, and his *argal* wound crownwise about his head.

The dress of the common Bedouin is often ragged and not overclean, but that of a Bedouin sheikh is fine raiment indeed. In town he discards his rough travelling *abba* of camel's hair, costing perhaps fifteen shillings, for one of silk, costing perhaps as many pounds, and to complete his attire wears a silver-hilted sword, the sign of his tribal authority. . . .

A great feature of Sham are the cafés—even more so than they are of Baghdad. Here they take indeed the place of our clubs, in the same way as did the coffee-houses of London in the days of Doctor Johnson. Like clubs, particular cafés are resorted to by particular patrons. In some you will find military officers, in others civilian officials, in others a mixture of both. Others again are resorted to chiefly by Arabs from the surrounding districts, others by all and sundry. Some of the better-class cafés have comfortable chairs, and French and Arabic newspapers. Most of the café patrons, however, have to content themselves with benches and with bringing their own literature.

Behold the sheikh and me, then, entering one of these temples to nicotine, coffee, and gossip. It is one of those which are resorted to by all and sundry,

so the general public of Damascus is well represented. Some are playing backgammon, some reading, some talking; all are smoking and drinking coffee. We steer our way to a seat, and give our orders and our tobacco to an attendant—our tobacco, because the weed provided in the cafés is not of the best. If, therefore, you are a little particular in what you smoke, it is better to purchase your tobacco outside. In a few minutes we have each a cup of coffee and a *narghileh* placed before us. The cup is very small, holding, perhaps, a wineglassful. And when you have drunk the coffee you no longer wonder at its smallness. Does one drink green Chartreuse out of a pint glass?

And the *narghileh*? What shall I say of the *narghileh*? This: that if I had to name something typical of the Orient, I should choose *it* as an emblem. With its glass water-filled vase, its long wooden stem, its silver receptacle for tobacco, its six-foot flexible tube, it stands—a stately edifice—in its complicated paraphernalia, in its picturesque unpractical unwieldiness, in its unnecessary elaboration as a lifeless personification of the East. Your briar is your trusty companion on the rolling decks of plunging vessels, in express trains rocking at sixty miles an hour, on long tramps upon windy uplands, when you move amongst the sons of a restless race, driven hither and thither by the demon Energy over the face of the earth. But the other—your *narghileh*—is a languorous and subtle mistress, to be wooed at rest under an Eastern sun, amongst a people who know not haste, and whose watchword is 'To-morrow.' . . .

The most famous mosque in Sham is of course the great Djamia-el-Oumia (the Ommiad Mosque).

Here is found the Western sight-seer in season—there is a fixed tariff for being shown round—and the Damascene beggar at all times. If one does not happen to be a sight-seer or a Damascene beggar, there is really not much reason to frequent the place. It is, moreover, fully described in all the guide-books, and in some which are not guide-books, so any further words of mine would be superfluous.

But there are other mosques in Damascus which the sight-seer never enters, and where in consequence—blessed exemption—there are no voluble guides to jar upon one's moods. In fact, it is doubtful if the sight-seer would gain admittance to most of these other mosques, where use, unlike at the Grand Mosque, has not accustomed the custodians to the invasion of the behatted Feringhi. My fez, and still more the company of my sheikh, however, passed me unquestioned—that is to say at times when public prayer was not being held.

I know of no building the interior of which is more impressive—hackneyed and distorted adjective, but the only suitable—more impressive than that of a large mosque, empty of worshippers. Even a cathedral under similar circumstances has not the same effect. Unlike in the West, you do not at once enter from the outside world into the building: there is an ante-chamber, as it were, to attune you to its solemnities. You find yourself first of all in an open court colonnaded at the sides, with a fountain playing in the centre. Two or three sleeping figures lie at full length on the pavement. In a shady corner an old man drones the Koran to a small circle of little boys. Above in the blue vault numberless pigeons wheel and flash



IN A MOSQUE COURTYARD
(The ablution before prayers)

in the sunlight, or settle on the minarets and cupolas with soft cooings and flutterings of wings. As from a great distance come to your ears the faint noises of the city. It is very restful and very peaceful, and you stand awhile half-hypnotised by its atmosphere. Then, taking off your shoes, you enter the mosque itself.

If—as is sometimes the case—this is walled off from the court, it is dark, and your eyes, dazzled by the glare outside, see nothing at first beyond a lofty space with a curious sense of emptiness. As your eyes become accustomed to the gloom, you see what has given you this sense of emptiness: it is that there are no seats. The marble floor glistens bare under the dim light, broken only here and there by stretches of matting or of prayer-carpets.

For the mosque makes no concessions to the weaknesses of its worshippers. It will give them none of the amenities of Western worship, nor reserved pews, nor comfortably cushioned seats, nor hassocks to protect their knees—nought to raise man in his devotions above the dust to which he must at the last return. Nothing rises above the ground save the pulpit, the platform from which the Koran is read, and the tall pillars which, supporting the roof, stretch into the obscurity above your head.

And it is this emptiness which marks the difference between a mosque and a church. The emptiness of the latter, with its rows of tenantless pews, seems a void waiting to be filled; the building seems to call for the presence of man to make it complete. But as you look round the former you feel that its emptiness is complete in itself, and that man is superfluous. And then your thoughts take another turn.

In the outside world you may be the least metaphysical of mortals. But here in the heart of a great faith which is alien to your own—in fact just because it *is* alien to your own—it is different, and the long quiet minutes pass as you lose your way in the unprofitable blind alleys, which lead to the great unanswerable trinity of — Whence? Why? and Whither?

A single worshipper enters the mosque, and you watch him half curiously, perhaps half enviously, as he proceeds through his complicated genuflexions, for he at any rate has no doubts. 'There is no God but God, and Mohammed is the Prophet of God.' Prayer must be said five times a day, and all Jews and infidels are doomed to the pit.

On going out you pass through the court once again. There the pigeons are still flashing and wheeling in the sun, the fountain is still murmuring softly to itself, and the recumbent figures are still motionless. Only the little group in the shady corner has altered —for the old man is fast asleep and his pupils have vanished.

But mosques have fallen on evil days in these latter times. One of my Moslem friends in Sham was the head of a sect of Dervishes, who had a certain mosque for their *takeea*, as the praying and lodging-place of Dervishes is called. My friend lived in a villa in Salahieh, which is a quarter situated above the town on the first slopes of the Anti-Lebanon. There I used often to visit him, and of an evening we would sit on the balcony of his house, overlooking his garden, and the plain far below dotted with villages, and the rich orchards—enclosing in their

midst the winding waters of the Barada and the beautiful city, its tall minarets gleaming white in the rays of the setting sun.

'Ah, Effendi,' the old man would say, 'in these days the glory of Islam is dying. In the old days my *takeea* had the revenue of forty-two villages assigned to it. Then Sultan Abdul Majid took away the revenues of the villages, and granted it one hundred pounds per month. After this Abdul Hamid reduced this to fifty pounds; and now I get monthly thirty pounds Turkish. How can I maintain the dignity of my mosque and of myself on thirty pounds Turkish? How can I pay attendants? How can I make repairs? How can I give free lodging to all the Dervishes of my order who come to Sham? *Al-hamdu-l'Illah*, I have some land of my own, and from it I get a little money. So I am able to prevent my mosque from falling down altogether, and to live in some sort as befits my station. But . . . it is not enough. . . . My mosque has become a shame and a reproach in the eyes of Sham—my mosque that in the old days was its delight and its pride. . . . There is no might and there is no majesty save in Allah the glorious, the great . . *kulu halin ezul*. . . . Everything comes to an end. Even the true religion must pass away in these evil days . . . unless . . . unless . . .'

Then he would break off into silence, and stare across the darkening landscape with fierce eyes, revolving in his mind I know not what wild schemes for the regeneration of Islam. . . .

The *takeea* of the Molawees (whirling Dervishes) was certainly pleasantly situated. It was a hot day, unpleasantly dusty, yet when I entered the *takeea*

I found myself in a 'pleasance'—I do not think there is any other word which exactly fits it—where the ripple of water was music for the ear, and the green of the trees and the delicate red of the roses rest for the eyes. There was a small summer-house at one end, where the sheikh of the Molawees received me. He was a tall, fine-looking man, very fair for an Arab, with blue eyes, and wore the peculiar dress of his order.

The peculiarity in the appearance of the Molawees sect lies in their headdress, which is a tall brown conical-shaped affair—something after the fashion of a bishop's mitre. As a rule they wear a long black outer cloak, under which are the ordinary Arab robes. The sheikh, however, wears an outer cloak of light blue, and has a blue cloth twisted round the base of his cap.

As we drank coffee and smoked cigarettes I engaged the sheikh in conversation, complimented him on the situation of his *takeea*, said how obliged I was to him for permission to view this unique sight, and in general endeavoured to grease the wheels of conversation. Notwithstanding my efforts, the wheels moved but slowly, and it was somewhat of a relief when the sheikh arose and, motioning to a Dervish who stood near, informed me that he would conduct me to my place.

Leaving the summer-house, we entered a building which faced the entrance gate, and were confronted by the doorkeeper, who signed to me to take off my boots. My guide, in compliment doubtless to my foreign nationality, protested against this formality. I, however, was on the side of the doorkeeper, for it is

my opinion, and that I think of most sensible people, that either you should keep away from Rome or, going there, do as Rome does. The middle course by which the foreign traveller, endeavouring to 'see something of the East,' refuses to leave *his* prejudices and customs behind him, and so tramples on the prejudices and customs of those amongst whom he thrusts himself, seems to me to be all against common sense, to say nothing of common decency.

Shoeless, and wearing my fez, there was nothing to distinguish me in the crowd from any fair-looking Turk, and so I escaped the annoyance and embarrassment of being pointed out and stared at as a Frank. In fact, I imagine if I had been wearing a hat it might not have been so easy to gain admittance.

The place in which I found myself at first sight did not look unlike a prize-ring. There was a large open boarded space in the centre, surrounded by low wooden railings. Around this railing, seated on the ground, were a crowd of people; up above was a gallery also filled. It was to the latter that my guide took me, and finally found me an inconspicuous corner from which I could see everything. Carefully avoiding sitting in front of a devout Mohammedan who was praying—one should never pass close in front of a Moslem at prayer—I squeezed myself into a corner, cross-legged, and prepared to be interested.

For some time, however, nothing happened. The floor continued empty, the crowd—of all sorts and conditions, including women, who had a curtained gallery to themselves, through which one saw vaguely their shrouded form—waited expectantly. Continuing my analogy of the prize-ring, and keeping my eyes

fixed on the empty boarded space, I could almost imagine that in a minute a lithe form in a voluminous sweater—followed by two others bearing towels, sponges, a basin, and the other paraphernalia of a glove fight—would enter the ring and proceed to his corner, amid a ripple of applause. But when there was a stir and a procession entered, it was of a very different nature, and consisted of the sheikh followed by his Dervishes, looking not unimposing in their tall mitres and long black cloaks.

Prayer-mats were now laid upon the ground—that of the sheikh being a particularly gorgeous one—and the sheikh and the Dervishes addressed themselves to prayer, accompanied by the onlookers. And so quite unexpectedly I found myself personally in a Mohammedan mosque, with service taking place.

I say 'unexpectedly,' because I had no idea that any part of the Mohammedan ritual would be indulged in before the whirling began. I had learnt that the Whirling Dervishes performed every Thursday at this time of the year. Now Friday is, as every one knows, the Mohammedan Sunday, and the only authority with me on the subject of Dervishes—that exceptionally complete book, Lane's *Modern Egyptians*—had not specifically mentioned that prayer was made beforehand. Indeed, if I had known that such was the case, I would have thought it more politic to suggest my coming in after the service was over; however, as it was, the only thing that remained for me to do was to sit still. To have gone out at this stage would have been impossible. In the event nobody gave me a second thought. Either they looked upon me as a Moslem unpurified for prayer and merely there as

a curious spectator; or as a Christian, under the invitation and patronage of the sheikh; or never noticed me at all in the press. The prayers were at length finished, and the Dervishes prepared to acquit themselves like men by throwing off their black outer cloaks, and appearing in long white skirts and tight-fitting white jackets of the same colour.

The 'ball,' however, opened very slowly, the Dervishes walking staidly round in a circle—counter-clockwise. As each Dervish reached the prayer-mat of the sheikh he took two quick long steps forward, turned, and bowed to the one following him, who returned his salutation. This continued until all had given and received a salute, which brought the sheikh back to his original position in front of his prayer-mat—all this to the accompaniment of slow music, the instruments consisting of a drum, a fiddle, and a pair of cymbals, and the whole having a much more pleasant and harmonious effect to my ear than the ordinary Eastern music.

The music now stopped, the Dervishes stood still in their positions, and the sheikh, stepping forward, uttered a short prayer or exhortation, his voice sounding strangely resonant through the silent, crowded building.

Again the music began, this time to a faster beat. The Dervishes again began their slow procession round, but as each reached the sheikh, who now stood still at his prayer-mat, a change occurred. The sheikh bent forward and kissed the cap of each Dervish, which was inclined for his salute, and no sooner was this done than, as if moved by some sudden and invisible machinery, the Dervish himself spun

away whirling giddily around. At first his arms would be crossed on his breast, his hands clasping his shoulders, but as his momentum increased his arms would swing outwards until they were at right angles to his body. The next Dervish would go through the same slow dignified approach, the same salutation from the sheikh, the same sudden rotation ; and the next, and the next, until the whole company of them, to the number of about fifteen, were whirling below me like so many gigantic white tops. It was a strange and a not ungraceful sight either. In fact, I have seen far more awkward expositions of the 'poetry of motion' in a Western ball-room than I did that day in a Dervish *takeea*.

From where I was—looking down—their whirling skirts prevented my seeing their feet, so that they seemed to be moved by some invisible power rather than by their own volition. This illusion was helped by the fact that they accomplished their whirling with great dexterity and smoothness, there being no up and down movement visible—that is, for the most part, a few novices perhaps being not so smooth in their movements as the rest. There was one old man whom I watched with special admiration : there was no doubt as to his being the 'star' of the troupe—the way he slowed down when the music ceased in the manner of a 'dying' top, ending with a twirl of his skirts around him, was the last word, I should say, in the art of whirling.

While whirling, the Dervishes did not adopt the same method of holding their arms, nor did indeed any one of them keep to the same method the whole way through. Some held their hips, others crossed

them on their breasts. Among the most curious styles was one who rested his head and long cap along his right arm, held at an angle of about 45° up from his shoulder, his left arm being at right angles to his body.

After ten minutes the music ceased, the Dervishes ceased spinning, coming to a standstill with their hands on their shoulders, their arms crossed before them, and the sheikh, entering the centre of the circle—he had not as yet taken part in the whirling—bowed gravely to them. The Dervishes returned his salutation, and took rest for a short while.

Again the music commenced, again the Dervishes whirled in the same manner, and after about the same space of time stopped, when once more the sheikh bowed and was bowed to.

The third and last bout of whirling was remarkable for the fact that the sheikh took part in it himself—that is, in a modified manner. He did not divest himself of his blue cloak, nor did he twirl on both feet, nor did he extend his arms fanwise. His movements were more dignified, as befitting his exalted rank. He merely twirled slowly on one foot, holding the lappet of his cloak with his right hand and letting his left hang loosely by his side. This last whirling must have lasted fully fifteen minutes, and concluded, as the two others had done, in low bows on the part of the sheikh and Dervishes to each other.

The final act was that by which the Dervishes kissed each other's hands, running up and down the semicircle of their companions by turns.

This was the end of the whirling for that day, so I made my way—with some little difficulty, for the crowd was large—outside, bade adieu to the sheikh,

thanking him for his courtesy in letting me be present at such an interesting ceremony, gave *backshish* to the Dervishes, and departed. . . .

With *al hammam* (the bath) I became acquainted in early days when I read *The Thousand and One Nights* ; later I read Burton's translation and learnt how the *hammam* covered the flirtations of flighty dames. At that period also I indulged in the Turkish baths of civilisation. But it was not until I reached Sham that I found the *hammam* of the *Arabian Nights* ready with open doors for curiosity and for pleasure.

The day is sultry ; the sultriness has penetrated even to the cool recesses of my house, and of a sudden I have a longing for the ease of the *hammam.* So I rise up and go forth into the glare, past the house of the Greek Church Patriarch, and thence up Straight Street. Some way up on my right lies the Sùk al Khayyateen (the Bazaar of the Tailors), and in it is the *hammam* of the same name.

On entering it for the first time you might get the impression of a lofty silk emporium, for all round you are bundles of coloured cloth—cloths spread out in tempting fashion, as it were, to catch the buyer's eye, cloths hanging overhead. But a fountain plays in the centre, and you notice next that round you, on four square daises raised some three feet above the ground, are long divans with here and there a silk-bemuffled, reclining figure. Yes ; you have not made a mistake. This is the *hammam.*

But it is not the first time by many that I have entered it. I may be said to know my way about, and pass without hesitation to my accustomed dais.

The attendants give me a smiling '*Marhubber,*' and returning their salutes, I take off my shoes before treading on the dais. Under my divan is a long drawer into which an attendant puts my clothes, after which he wraps me in two towels, and gingerly I step off the dais on to a pair of high clogs, which form of footgear is worn by all the bathers—I say gingerly, because one's progress on high clogs over a slippery marble floor is not far removed from the uncertainties of skating. But I am more expert than I was, and can travel with some amount of safety if not speed. A little door leads out of the *meslakh* (entrance hall), as it is called, and as it shuts behind me I feel an instant increase of temperature. I find myself in a long, bare chamber, with a marble floor and stone walls. The floor is finely mosaicked in black and brown. Around the walls are divans, for it is the *beyt-owwal* (first warm chamber), in which the bathers undress in winter. From the *beyt-owwal* I click-clack over the marble floor into the *hararah*, the warmest chamber of all, the lowest inferno of the *hammam*. The floor and walls are those of the *beyt-owwal*, but around are stone basins, with primitive taps for hot and cold water. From an attendant I received a fresh towel, which I gird round my waist, flick my clogs away from me spinning over the slippery surface, and seat myself by the side of a basin.

It is very pleasant here, sitting by the side of my basin, sluicing myself with a tin dish. There is a fascination about the tessellated marble floor glistening with spilt water, a sense of freeness about my apparel, and a disresponsibility from the great world without. I am become once more as primitive man,

with no thought for the morrow, sitting by the side of some old-world spring, clad in a waist-cloth.

There are other little groups about the other basins. A man has brought his child, and is pouring Niagaras on the little fellow's head, who pretends to like it, and gasps bravely with tight-shut eyes between the douches.

Further on two youths act the amateur masseur upon one another, thus saving some part of their fee and also, be it remarked, of their time. For in the *hammam* things move in the leisurely Eastern fashion, and it is some little while before the masseur comes and leads me to one of the little apartments off the *hararah*. Here again I sit myself down by a basin, and operations begin.

My attendant is not unlike my idea of the Old Man of the Sea. Somewhat bent with age and work, his grip is nevertheless of the strongest, and his hands—from much contact with water—have a scaly appearance and feel. He works on me with grim earnestness, and I am as clay beneath the potter's hand. With a rough glove he rasps me all over, and then, bringing in a large basin and an enormous sponge made of palm-tree fibre, he raises a lather which would terrify the heart of the stoutest urchin ever scrubbed in a nursery. As for me, I shut my eyes as tight as they will go, for I know from experience that never has the 'Dirty Boy' of Pears' soap received a more vigorous cleansing than is in store for me. And so it proves. Up and down, to and fro, now on my back and now on my face, I received such a soaping as would make the hardest-handed of nurses envious. At length the old man is satisfied, and feeling the splash of water on my head and shoulders, I open my eyes cautiously

and find him looking at me with the impersonal and critical inspection of the artist at his handiwork.

'*Naemun,*' he mumbles, with an air which says plainly that if there is anything left of me it is only through his clemency.

'*Allah enam alek,*' I answer, and he goes to seek fresh victims.

Immersion in a tank follows, the water hot to bearing-point, then once more do I mount my clogs and click-clack into the *beyt-owwal*, where an attendant gives me new lamps for old, dry towels for wet. A door is opened, and I find myself once more in the lofty *meslakh* with its four daises, its long divans, its spread of coloured cloths, its silk-bemuffled, languid figures. Hardly have my feet touched the dais when an attendant has whipped off my towels and clad me in fresh robes—no towels these, but drapings of delicate yellow silk, the beautiful colour of old gold. He motions me to my divan, and as I sink luxuriously upon it, covers me with yet another robe, and winds a silken cloth turbanwise around my forehead, lest my august head should in any wise catch cold. Turning my head to my neighbour on the next divan, I murmur '*Naemun.*' '*Allah enam alek,*' he murmurs drowsily back, this being not a prelude to conversation—the Gods of Silence forbid at such a time—but merely the etiquette of the *hammam.* I sink back into my divan, and lo! a *narghileh* and a cup of fragrant tea are at my elbow.

And now I am travelling slowly on the road to *Nirvana.* Ay, *Nirvana!* for not by any Western word can one conjure up a vision of perfect rest. *Nirvana,* where 'there is neither good nor evil, pleasure nor

pain, but only Brahma.' No pleasure, that is, by your restless standards of Europe, by which, forsooth, one must be ever doing something to acquire happiness —fighting or making money, sinning or triumphing over evil, ever stirring amid a stirring crowd. But by other and subtler standards I am here wrapped round in the very essence of enjoyment. I have a pleasant sense of lassitude in my limbs, a drowsy sense of detachment in all my being. Not under the heavy hand of sleep do I, as one temporarily dead, pass the long hours all unconscious of my bliss ; not in the glare of wakefulness is my cosmos caught up in the thousand eddies of the fierce stream of existence ; but somewhere between sleeping and waking—as Mohammed's coffin hung between earth and heaven—I drowse with half-shut eyes. How softly the fountain croons to itself, how bravely flash its upward jets which turn to a hundred falling raindrops, how rich the silken hues, how restful the muffled figures joined with me in the mute companionship of rest, how perfect the silence which fills the lofty emptiness !

I draw sleepily at the mouthpiece of my *narghileh.* With a little murmur of protest the smoke, leaving the glass bowl, passes through the water and through the long sinuous stem, until it finds its goal deep down in my lungs ; thence, leaving added peace behind, it is puffed slowly forth in spiral clouds. I sip my tea, and at the moment it is as nectar fit for the gods . . . and I, too, am as a god. . . .

> Here where the world is quiet,
>   Here where all trouble seems
> Dead winds and spent waves riot
>   In doubtful dreams of dreams.

Free from the Wheel of Life, utterly free . . . how fast and furious it spins!—and so far and so unconnected am I that I can see it spin calm and unmoved. For it has nothing that can move me a whit; nor hate, nor love, nor greed, nor anxious ambition. If there is aught of reality about me it is not of these, but of the deep silence, the gentle crooning of the fountain, the soft coverings which enfold my sleepy limbs.

Far across the *meslakh* I see a figure reclining enwrapped in silk, a silken kerchief wrapped turbanwise around his head. The figure pleases my eye; it seems to embody the perfect atmosphere of rest in which my being is. I raise the stem of my *narghileh* to my mouth. The figure does the same. I draw the smoke far into my lungs, and let the stem fall. Not otherwise the figure. I look hard at it. It grows familiar. With mild surprise I realise that it is none other than myself, transformed by a mirror from my ordinary self of the twentieth century into a figure from the bygone ages—Haroun Al Raschid, perhaps, leaning on his elbow listening to the words of Sharazada the Fair.

But now the time of my sojourn in *Nirvana* is drawing swiftly to a close, for not in this world can mortals dwell there save for a fleeting space of time. Nearer and nearer do I drop from my serene heights to where in space the Wheel of Life spins dizzily around; clearer and clearer do I hear the brazen clanging of its uproar. Already I am seized with its vague unrest—gusts of its hurly-burly sweep through my mind. In vain I endeavour to retain my aloofness, my sense of adequateness in merely being, not doing. I move

uneasily on my couch. I wish to be up and moving ; and at that I know that I am on the Wheel again, on the Wheel where there is no rest but only toil and travel.

It is useless to remain quiescent any longer. Of what profit is it that the body should rest while the spirit frets ? So I arise and dress, and far across the *meslakh* I see, not Haroun Al Raschid, but a very ordinary looking type of the twentieth century. I feel slightly humiliated, shrug my shoulders with a would-be indifference, and pass out into the shouting bazaars.

PART II

CHAPTER VIII

QUETTA TO SEISTAN

THE guard blew his whistle, the hubbub on the platform rose a note or two higher—the native of India is not a silent traveller—and then died away as the train drew slowly out of Quetta Station, taking me towards Nushki, and far beyond it towards the open road leading over many, many hundreds of miles to Seistan, to Meshed, to Teheran, to six months' free and unfettered 'language leave' in Persia. At last!

I think most travellers will know the meaning of that 'At last!' It means that the weary time of shopping, of packing, of engaging your servants, of assembling your transport—camels, mules, or horses, as the case may be—of haggling, of vexatious delays, of all the tedious arrangements necessary for a long overland journey, is past and done with. It means that your passport is in your pocket, your boxes are packed, and your caravan is at the door. You light your pipe, take a last look round to see that nothing has been forgotten, and go out, condensing a whole song of thanksgiving in those two words 'At last!'

My caravan was not at the door, but the next best

thing to it, awaiting my arrival at 'rail-head,' Nushki, whence the Quetta-Seistan Trade Route finds its way over about three hundred and fifty miles of bare desert to the Persian frontier station of Koh-Malik-Siah. And at rail-head did my train arrive some six hours after starting, emerging from a labyrinth of small hills, and disclosing to my gaze a great plain stretching away to the horizon, flooded by the rays of the evening sun.

Rail-head! A romantic word this, smacking of war, and of countries where travel is conducted on other lines than by merely buying a first- or third-class ticket, and jostling one's fellow-passengers for a corner seat with one's face to the engine. But there are perhaps now only two countries left in the world which are free from those innocent parallel lines of steel which look so insignificant and mean so much, and both these two came into my mental vision as I stood on Nushki platform. For to one of them I was bound, and the frontier line of the other—Afghanistan—ran only some sixty miles to the north.

My caravan—four riding camels—which had marched down from Quetta under the charge of my orderly, met me at the station, and a proud man was I when mounted and at the head of my retinue. I led the way towards the dak-bungalow which was to shelter us until we made our start on the day after the morrow.

Abdul, the aforesaid orderly, is a Hazara sepoy, and my chief vizier, dragoman, and *karawan-bashi* (chief of the caravan) all rolled into one. Always cheerful, no matter how tedious the way may be—and a smiling face on a weary stage is no small boon—shrewd, with perfect *savoir-faire* for the details of travelling, from tying a knot to finding the path on



WRITER'S CARAVAN



A SPILL IN THE SNOW

a dark night, possessed of that tact of dealing with strangers which is half the battle in successful wayfaring, Abdul is that rare person, the born traveller. 'A brave heart and a courteous tongue will carry thee far in the jungle.' Ay, and on the road too, and it will not be Abdul's fault if we do not enter Teheran some months hence with our two thousand miles of travel a pleasant memory of the past.

As for the other members of the caravan, they consist of the writer, Khuda-Dad his Persian servant, his *sarwan* (camel-man), and Rags. Khuda-Dad—that is to say, the 'God-given'—is certainly a gift from heaven to his present master, whatever he may have been to his original parents. He is a good servant and an excellent cook, under whose ministrations even the daily round of chickens and eggs, varied by an occasional store, is relieved of some of its monotony. Like Abdul he is a cheerful soul, but, unlike him, of small physique and inclined to tire at the end of a long march. Unlike him also he has not his *suaviter in modo* for the conduct of affairs, and so becomes involved in wordy warfare with hewers of wood, drawers of water, dealers in produce, and the like, in which the sahib every now and again is forced to interfere lest a brawl ensue.

The *sarwan* is merely a—*sarwan*. Long intercourse with camels does not tend to develop originality of character. However, what is of far more importance, he has the appearance of taking good care of my camels; and being moreover a dense, slow-witted creature he serves as a butt for the good-natured chaff of the more nimble-witted Abdul and Khuda-Dad, thus filling his place in our little circle.

And Rags? What shall I say of Rags? That he is silky-coated, sedately-mannered and bright-eyed?

That he is the friend of many years, the companion of many happy hours on the road? That he excels all others of his species in the steadfastness of his affection and the personality of his temperament? This is all true, and yet leaves half unsaid. So I will merely add what will convey all or nothing to you, according to what manner of person you may be: Rags is my dog.

The day after the morrow saw our start, and the order of going was this. Each member of the caravan bestrode a camel, with baggage equal to the weight of one man—for the load of a riding camel is two riders—strapped in front of him over the empty seat of the saddle. It is true that by this method I had to travel light, whilst by taking baggage camels in addition to riding ones I could have been less parsimonious in the way of outfit. It is true also that by this method I had no spare transport in case a camel lamed. But it is also true that the method I adopted was—saving accidents—the cheapest, for I hoped to sell my caravan at a profit, or at any rate rupee for rupee, in Meshed or Teheran; and that baggage camels would either have entailed my accompanying them from stage to stage—a most tedious form of progress, as a walking camel is the slowest of created creatures—or trotting on and leaving it to Fate and the *sarwan* to bring them safely into camp, in which case, once across the Persian frontier, the local brigands would probably prove one too many for Fate and the *sarwan*. As for a camel laming, that was one of the risks of the road.

Though other and more recent days have been overlaid with the dust of travel, not to be dug out without the help of my diary, the afternoon of our

setting forth stands out as clear as if it were but twenty-four hours old. So elastic is Time, such queer tricks does memory play us, so great is the egoism of the wayfarer wrapped up in his trivial comings and goings!

We left Nushki at about three o'clock, for the stage was a short one of only eleven miles: larger marches we would reserve until our beasts were hardened. I stood watching the loading, until finally the last knot was tied, the last bale adjusted, when I climbed to my seat; and with a loud '*Bismillah Al-Rahmam Al-Rahim*' (In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful) from Khuda-Dad—no true Mohammedan begins any action of importance without this pious preface—we rode off. Somehow I felt that we ought to have had a more imposing 'send-off,' that, like Tom Sawyer in the more important moments of his life, a brass band would not have been inappropriate. However, there was only a little group of natives to watch us depart, and of these the only interested spectator was the dak-bungalow *chowkidar*, who asked for *backshish*, which he had already been given.

But though our start had not been an imposing one, our first stage was accomplished very successfully. One or two of the camels were loaded a trifle heavily, and I wished to make a test case of our opening march, so as to be able to judge of future results. At first the beasts moved slowly, stalking along at their peculiar camel's walk, which is, for the rider, more like being in a small boat in a heavy sea than anything else. But soon Khuda-Dad, who in the topsy-turvy fashion of the East proved to be the camel-driver *par excellence* of the party, while the *sarwan* was no

better than myself—the novice—gave his mount a few hearty thwacks, struck up a long-drawn yodelling dirge, and the caravan slid easily into the *jambaz* (camel-trot), which will run down any other living thing in the world, provided you give it time enough.

I have detailed the personnel of our expedition; now for the other and equally important half—the camels. First there is Janda's Pride, or Janda for short. Him I christened after 'The Riding Camel':

> I was as sour as a snake to handle, and as rough as a rock to ride,
> But I could keep up with the West Wind, and my pace was Janda's pride.

Though this is a criminal libel on my Janda, who has a most urbane un-camel-like disposition, and moves as smoothly as a rocking-horse. With regard to pace:

'Swift!' had said his Baluchi owner who sold him to me, gesticulating in the ecstasy of his admiration. 'Why, Sahib, he won the races[1] down at Sibi last year, and this year would have won in Quetta, but, look you, he ran out of the course, such is the keenness of his spirit.' And he shook his head sadly. All this with the air of one recounting triumphs at Newmarket and Epsom.

Janda is undoubtedly the pick of my string, wears a collar of bells to announce the fact, and always has the honour of carrying the fortunes of the writer.

Then there is Kuchik (the Small One). He is a smooth-skinned, good-looking youngster; fast, but not up to any great weight. A regular camel's temper his—snarling, grumbling, vicious, and greedy

[1] At local fairs, &c., camel-races are often a feature.

withal; in fact not an amiable travelling companion.

The remaining two are good honest hardy beasts, slow, but as strong as houses. Them, after some thought, I named Yajuj and Majuj—Persian for Gog and Magog—which somehow seemed to fit them. These appellations at first created great merriment amongst my followers, but soon became matters of everyday speech, and it would be reported to me gravely that Yajuj was going a little lame, for instance, or that Majuj was off his feed, and the like.

All that afternoon we trotted forward, and, reaching our stage at half-past five, I repocketed my watch, well satisfied. Nearly four and a half miles an hour! A short stage, of course. On the long ones we should have to be content with something below that figure, but still, for the opening run, very good.

There are *chapper-khanas* (rest-houses) all along the route as far as the Seistan frontier, but our first halting-place being merely in the nature of a half-way house to the *manzil* (camp, halting-place) proper, there was only a little mud hut of two rooms, with a courtyard attached, for our accommodation. I reflected, however, that if we always had such a building to shelter in at the day's end during the next six months we should be more than ordinarily fortunate; and when I had taken possession of one room and my retinue of another, and a carpet—sinful luxury this—had been spread on the earthen floor, and my campbed, table, and chair had been erected, and my boxes ranged along the wall and a lamp lit, it was as cosy a lodging for the night as you could wish for.

Then came the question—the great and important

question—of the evening meal. It seemed about as wild a proceeding as 'calling spirits from the vasty deep' to expect food to materialise in this microscopic *manzil*, planted in the midst of the desert. However, an old man suddenly appeared—the *chowkidar*, it would seem, of the place—who announced that he would produce a chicken for the sahib. Whence and how, unless like a conjurer from up his sleeve, I did not quite comprehend. On being graciously granted permission to perform this feat, the old man again disappeared into the wilderness, and as it was now growing late, and I had not much faith in the chicken-producing trick, I opened a tin of sardines, and dined on them, hard-boiled eggs, and *chupatties*, washed down by steaming hot cocoa. And may I never fare worse!

'Dinner' over, I lit a pipe, and strolled out through the little courtyard, where my servants were squatting round a fire, into the night. Just outside the door were the huddled shapes of my camels, steadily munching, and as I stopped and watched them with the interest of an owner in the well-being of his animals, they raised their long necks and peered at me, then, satisfied with their inspection, fell to munching again. A figure came out of the darkness, holding something that clucked and struggled. It was the old man, who had performed his conjuring trick according to promise. The chicken would do for the morrow's breakfast instead of to-day's dinner.

I moved a few hundred yards away from the *manzil*, and sat down on a little mound. Soon a cold nose was thrust into my hand, a silky head was laid on my knee, and a warm little body snuggled itself up to mine. Rags had come out to enjoy the night air

with his master. The moon was not yet up, overhead the sky was ablaze with stars, all around, save where the fire in the courtyard flickered through the open door, the desert stretched sombre and still. Yet not quite still. For now and then, if I strained my ears, there floated up the faint sound of the far-off barking of dogs and the intermittent cries of voices, coming doubtless from the nomad encampment whose black booths I had seen that evening as we rode up. I was back on the Road again—back on the Road.

Love and war, the lure of ambition, the lust for gold, these have their enduring places amid the lode-stars which move the children of men. Yet not so far behind—at least for some—comes the Road. And why? There is no complete answer. For like every other pursuit in the world it has its moments of surfeit, of distaste, of boredom—only the untravelled imagine that the traveller is for ever singing a pæan of joy—and like everything else worth having in the world it demands its price: not all our modern space-decreasing inventions, for instance, have solved the problem of how to be in two places at once. But with all it grips, and though it lets you escape for a time back to cities and civilisation, it is but to draw you out once again, and again, and again.

Thus I sat for awhile, engaged doubtless in much the same thoughts which every traveller has the night of his first march out. Then I knocked my pipe against a stone, rose, and went in to bed.

The next fortnight or so after that first stage was filled with steady marching day after day, and so, that neither reader nor writer may weary, let a typical day be taken as a sample.

I awoke with a start then, to find Khuda-Dad by my bed, holding a candle in one hand, and in the other my watch, whereon is marked three, or four, or five, or some such improperly early hour. We start thus betimes, partly because camels travel better by night, and partly to allow them to have their grazing during the day. I would give all I possess to have the moral courage to turn over and sleep once more. But held by my own complacent order of the night before for an early start, I stretch myself, condemn all wayfaring to the bottomless pit, rise, and pull on my clothes. Scarcely am I out of bed before Khuda-Dad has whipped off the blankets, probably fearing a return to them on my part once his back is turned; and while I, in a species of stupor somewhere between sleeping and waking, sit smoking a cigarette and sipping a cup of tea, all around me is bustle and movement. My valise is strapped, my boxes are locked, and from outside the grumbling of the camels and the hoarse ejaculations of the orderly and the *sarwan* show that loading up is proceeding.

Presently enters Khuda-Dad to say that all is ready for the start, and in a few minutes we have left the *manzil* behind us. The sky is cloudless, with a regular traveller's moon, bright and clear, so we have no difficulty about the road. I walk on ahead —I shall have had my fill of camel-riding before the day is over—with Rags trotting at my heels, and the camels about a hundred yards behind, looming large, each with his own particular fantastic shadow.

An hour or so passes, and I mount Janda. Simply said, but not quite so simply done. For the process of a camel coming to earth is complicated, and the

cause of much labour and thought—both apparently of a painful nature—to the animal himself. First he has to make up his mind to squat at all. When he has conceded this point—assisted thereto by blows on his neck, knees, and elsewhere, as well as by various guttural cries—still he must needs hover on the brink, like a bather facing a chilly plunge, all the while expostulating and complaining, before finally sinking on his knees. In this position he remains for a period, groaning pitiably, as of one calling upon his Maker for help against the tyranny of mankind. All the while he is in considerable embarrassment with regard to his hind legs, which have not yet come to earth, and for the life of him cannot decide whether the right should be tucked under the left, or vice versa. At length he decides upon a plan of action, and lowering himself cautiously upon his haunches, and coming to rest with a long sliding motion and a sigh of relief, proceeds to chew the cud and ruminate upon things in general, with the evident expectation of a long repose before him. His indignation when he finds that this repose will only be for such duration as will enable you to seat yourself comfortably in the saddle is great, and rising suddenly in his wrath he nearly succeeds in shooting you first over his head, then over his tail. Failing in this, and encouraged by more guttural cries and more applications of your camel-whip, he breaks sulkily into the *jambaz*, and all is well.

This performance has to be gone through before I am upon Janda's back, and so for a few minutes the stillness is broken by bubblings, shouts, imprecations, and excited barks from Rags, who evidently considers it is some sort of entertainment indulged in specially

for his amusement. Then we swing forward once more, and there is no sound to be heard but the shuffle of the camel's pads on the sand and the jingle of the bells round Janda's neck.

Shuffle, shuffle, jingle, jingle; on we go, and on, and on. I change my position from astride to side-saddle to relieve my cramped limbs, and back again to astride. The stars twinkle, the moon shines serenely, our shadows cling to us faithfully, and still we jog on, with nothing to show that we are in truth making any advance at all save the white two-foot-wide camel-track which slides away beneath us. Shuffle, shuffle, jingle—

And then suddenly another sound breaks across our monotonous refrain. From somewhere ahead, but not to be classified at first . . . lost . . . then heard again, and this time louder and more insistent, comes a gentle, melodious chiming, for all the world like the pealing of church bells heard a long way off. But since no church or chapel is here within a hundred leagues, then a caravan. And so it proves; and soon the air resounds with its merry clamour, and each bell—not the tinkling toy of the riding camel, such as Janda wears, but the full-toned, sonorous gong of the beast of burden—is individually ringing its music into the night, and a long line of swaying silhouettes is slowly passing us, and my retinue are shouting out greetings to voices that answer from the darkness, and the silent void of five minutes since is filled with the brisk sense of the companionship of many men and animals. Then the caravan has passed, the desert lies empty and still before us, the bells melt their individuality once more into one harmonious

whole, grow faint, like church chimes heard from afar off, are lost . . . come to our ears yet again . . . and then cease.

Time passes, and right behind us, for we are steering almost due west, a faint pink flushes the sky and a trace of greyness flecks the moonlight. These, the first tokens of the dawn. But still ahead the night holds good. Then very slowly the eastern sky turns to crimson, and the greyness to white light, which runs westward, driving the night before it, putting out the stars one by one, and bringing up to view, beneath it, desolate mile after desolate mile. Soon the sun himself climbs over the horizon, and in a while it is broad day, but She of the Night will not in anywise accept dismissal, and still clings to her place, looking at last like some foolish stage moon which has been overlooked when the scene has changed from night to morn.

Another half-hour, breakfast by the road, something more substantial *this* time than a cigarette and a cup of tea, then to camel again. And soon the burden and heat of the day are heavy upon us. For the sun is high in the heavens, and though it is October and so not really hot as warmth goes east of Suez, still the blaze and the glare encompass us in one vast and dreary ring—sands alternating with patches of stony waste, sand-dunes shimmering in the haze, mirages of cool lakes that fade away at our approach, dust-devils that spin feverishly hither and thither moved by mysterious breezes which never come to fan our cheeks, the abomination of desolation naked and unashamed. Yet through it all the camel moves undismayed and indifferent. His brother beasts of

the caravan, the horse and the mule, hurry furtively across the desert, as if knowing that here they are aliens, that here Death—in his cruel guise of thirst—dogs their footsteps, and that at the next well alone is safety to be won. But the camel hurries not. Thirst to him, who can go many days without water, is robbed of half its terrors, and this wilderness is his home. Nevertheless, even his home can treat him hardly; even upon *his* assured footsteps disaster creeps unawares. For here and there beside the track we come upon grim remains: whole skeletons, scattered bones, sometimes the ghastly decomposing shapes of those who have fallen by the way.

Then at length, perched upon some small eminence perhaps, appears the *manzil*—or is it the *manzil*? The cursed mirage plays so, one cannot tell for sure. Perhaps it is merely a sandhill, and for the next ten minutes the most important question in the whole world is whether that speck is, or is not, the stage.

'Abdul,' I shout at length, 'is that the *manzil*?'

He shades his eyes with his hands.

'Yes, Sahib; that is the *manzil* without doubt.'

Thank goodness! And at length even those last few miles, when the camels are tired and time drags on by leaden feet, and the *manzil* gets no nearer but seemingly travels before us on a volition of its own, even those last few miles are somehow accomplished, and the day's travel is done.

Perhaps nothing gives a better idea of the complete desolateness of the country traversed by this trade route than these very *manzils*. For they are not villages—there is only one hamlet on the whole route from Nushki to the Persian frontier—but merely shelters

erected by the Indian Government for the convenience of the traveller, to wit, a *chapper-khana*, a serai, a levy post, and, in some of the larger *manzils*, a shop and a post and telegraph office. Just a few small houses flung down in the midst of the desert, not a tree, not a shrub do they contain within their limits; nothing to explain their *raison d'être* meets the eye, but to one's intelligence the fact is of course plain—they hold the only water within twenty, thirty, or forty miles.

But once within the rest-house one can forget the wilderness. For there are carpets on the floors, curtains over the windows, even easy-chairs, and the air of comfort, seclusion, and cool shade is very restful after the blinding glare of the world without. Books there are too, the property of the *manzil*, left by kindly travellers on their way through. One of these I pick up at hazard to pass the time until Khuda-Dad shall come with lunch.

Lunch over, forty winks—or it may be even fifty—not undeserved seeing the hour of our start: then to the study of Persian for some hours, and then to the best hour of the day. For it is now close on sunset, and putting a book in my pocket—one of some tattered old friends which have followed my wanderings for more than a few years—I stroll out, Rags at my heels, and take a seat on some neighbouring sand-dune.

A caravan near by is preparing to start under the vociferous guidance of a few Persians clad in long bright-coloured dressing-gowns and high conical caps—picturesque figures these, straight from the *Arabian Nights*—and some wild-looking, ragged Baluch *sarwans*.

The sun sets, the caravan stalks away, I read a

little, *economically*—not only in stores must a traveller be sparing—and muse somewhat in the lazy contented fashion of one with a good day's work, physical and mental, behind him, until night drives me in to the *manzil* for dinner.

After dinner the simple accounts of the day, so much for camel-fodder, so much for eggs, so much for chickens, and so forth.

Then Khuda-Dad broaches the question of the morrow's start, and I, forgetful already of the stress of this morning's rising, say with a stout heart, 'The same hour as to-day.' . . .

In the above manner we travelled as far as Koh-Malik-Siah, which is distant about one hundred miles from Nasratabad, the capital of Seistan. But there a mischance of the road befell us, and one of our camels —Kuchik—went lame. Not having a spare animal, we were faced by a difficulty, but, necessity being the mother of invention, we solved it in the following way :—We relieved Kuchik of his rider and his load, after which he could limp along at a walk, though with some pain I am afraid, poor beast. We also relieved Yajuj of his rider, and put up Kuchik's load instead of the latter. But this necessitated two of our number being dismounted, and reduced our rate of march between stages from four miles an hour to about two or two and a half, the utmost a camel can accomplish at a walk.

If this had occurred on the other side of Kuh-Malik-Siah I could have gone ahead myself on Janda with Khuda-Dad, and left the rest of my caravan to follow slowly afterwards ; but once across the Persian frontier it was a different matter, and the close proximity of

the Afghan border, and the possibility of gun-running parties being in the neighbourhood, made me unwilling to split up my little force, such as it was.

So we made two weary marches, the details of which —quite tedious enough at the time—far be it from me to live through again by narration. Suffice to say that starting from Kuh-Malik-Siah one morning at 6 A.M., with two hours' halt in the middle of the day, we reached our *manzil* at twelve that night, and starting from the *manzil* at 2 P.M. the next day, reached our next stage, a place called Lutak, at 2.30 A.M. the next morning.

The tedium of these marches was somewhat relieved by the many ruins we passed—a testimony to the former greatness of Seistan—and by Khuda-Dad's sagas as to the doughty deeds of Rustum, for this is supposed to be the country of that redoubtable warrior, who is also a Persian national hero. So I heard all about Rustum himself, and Sohrab, and Ruksh the horse. The latter's manger was pointed out to me—a tower of no small size—and the place where his hind legs were hobbled while he ate. This latter place was some eight hundred yards off the manger, and as Khuda-Dad wisely observed :

'If Ruksh was so large, Sahib, what must have been the size of Rustum, who rode him ? '

As for our march into Lutak, it contained one of those little unexpected, unrehearsed effects of travel which are in truth the salt of wayfaring.

I have already said we did not reach our destination until 2.30 A.M., but long before that, about two hours after sunset, found us somewhat tired, and very hungry, plodding over the plain through the pitch-black night,

with very little idea of our whereabouts. For we had had to make several detours owing to the recent floods —a large part of Seistan is intersected with canals— and the guide whom we had obtained from the last stage confessed himself at fault. However, at length we saw a friendly light glimmering in the darkness, and made our way towards it, expecting to find a nomad encampment, where we might make a halt for food, and get information as to our road. But on approaching the light we found but a solitary fire, built up in a little hollow of the ground, with a single figure crouching over it, and on a still nearer approach this proved to be, not a witch and her cauldron, as might naturally have been expected at such an hour and place, but an old man engaged in—of all prosaic occupations—boiling a saucepan of turnips !

Now a fire that would boil turnips would also make tea, and so—with a few words of salutation to the old man—we soon had the camels down and hobbled, the saddle-bag containing the provisions opened, and a kettle, filled from our water-skins, hissing on the fire. Khuda-Dad produced for my benefit a plate, a knife and fork, and some cold chicken. *Chupatties*—of which we had a good supply with us—and tea were for every one, including, needless to say, the aforesaid old man, who kindly obliged with many boiled turnips. Beyond this courtesy and the information vouchsafed that the tents of his tribe were somewhere behind him —pointing vaguely into the night—he seemed to show but little interest or curiosity in our sudden descent upon him, and continued to stir his saucepan and gaze dreamily into the fire. Anon, the pangs of hunger assuaged, I puffed at my pipe, sipped my tea luxuri-

CITY GATE, SEISTAN

ously, and had leisure to observe the scene, which was not without its picturesqueness. Sometimes the fire would burn up and throw into relief the faces of the little circle around it, and, beyond, the squatting figures of the camels. Then it would sink into dull embers, and the darkness would creep up upon us, and I would be conscious of the lonely waste around us and the gloomy arch of the sky above.

And the whole circumstances being what they were, it was not strange that they brought back vividly to my mind the last occasion I had supped with any of the 'People of the Tents,' which was in the North Syrian desert, one march on from Palmyra, with my face towards Damascus.

Indeed, so taken was I with my surroundings that I was in two minds whether I would not sleep there for the night instead of toiling on in the darkness. However, on being questioned, the old man of the turnips said that the *manzil* was but a *farsang* and a half distant (about six miles), and, as it was now only shortly after nine, I considered we should arrive there by midnight, taking the darkness into account, which forced us to go at a walking pace. So we got to camel again and rode off.

But ill did that old man requite me for my *back-shish*, my *chupatties*, and my tea, with his false information; for it was not in three hours but nearer six that a very weary caravan at last arrived at Lutak.

There I found an escort and a horse for my personal use, kindly sent out by the British Consul at Nasratabad, and the next evening, after a ride of about twenty miles, I saw the town itself—disappointingly like a large overgrown village—stretch ahead of me across the

horizon. I was at the terminus of the Quetta-Seistan Trade Route.

And if in retrospect I was glad that the journey was over, I was also glad that it had been accomplished. There are other sides to travelling than the fulfilling of the senses with beautiful scenery, and this trade route, created and maintained by British enterprise, passing for hundreds of miles through barren wastes, struggling—and struggling successfully too, as its yearly returns show—with the bitter cold in winter, the scorching heat in summer, with scarcity of water, scarcity of food, with the near presence of lawless tribes, such a route has its own peculiar appeal to the imagination of the traveller who has traversed it, as being not among the least of the pioneer works which are yearly performed at the outskirts of the Empire.

CHAPTER IX

SEISTAN TO MESHED

At Nasratabad the complement of my men and animals was reduced. Item one : there was a place open for Abdul as *gulam* (orderly) in the British Consulate, and as this employment would be permanent, while that which I could offer him would extend only to Meshed, or at most to Teheran, I—though very reluctantly, for Abdul was a pearl of great price among travelling attendants—waived my right to him. Item two : Kuchik was likely to remain lame for longer than I could afford to stay in Seistan. Item three : the heart of my *sarwan* failed him at the thought of the long journey to the north, over hills and possibly through snows—for it was now November. So, as he had performed his duties moderately well during our five hundred miles' trip across the Baluchistan desert, I paid him up and bade him depart to a place where no snow is, and where the temperature is ever at boiling-point.

Then, after some cogitation, I determined to send a box back to India, and with my luggage thus lightened go forward with only three camels, having obtained a fresh *sarwan*, and having settled for Kuchik to be sold at Seistan. These arrangements concluded, we were ready for the road once more.

But first some words as to Nasratabad; and they shall be few, for, however important it may look spelt across the map, or in print, as the capital of Seistan, in cold reality it shrinks before the traveller's disappointed gaze to a large, overgrown, dilapidated village. The dome-shaped houses from the distance, or from above, present a spurious air of solidarity and picturesqueness, which disappears on the closer acquaintance of a walk through the town. A large number of the houses are in ruins, and many more in not much better condition. There are a few small and squalid bazaars, and the only two shops of any size are in the hands of Indian traders. Khuda-Dad informed me in a voice of inexpressible contempt that there was not a single *khawa-khana* in the place, and as far as I could see there was only one dilapidated mosque. The inhabitants are so miserably poor that the lower classes subsist for the greater part of the year on water-melons, with or *without* the addition of bread. Here and there you pass a figure in a dirty tattered uniform, plying some trade or performing some odd job. A rusty rifle may, or may not, lie beside him. In any case you know that this is a *sarbaz* (Persian soldier), eking out his pittance of pay—which as likely as not he rarely sees —by civil occupation. Often his face has the drawn listlessness of the *tareaki* (opium-smoker), for this vice is very prevalent in Persia, especially among the upper classes and, for some reason or other, among the *sarbazes*. If you happen to serve your own country in 'the ancient and honourable profession of arms,' you may perhaps feel a sort of vicarious shame that here, among the descendants of the men whom Nadir Shah

led to victory on many a hard-fought day, from the waters of the Persian Gulf to the Imperial city of Delhi, it should have fallen on such evil times.

Such is Nasratabad, the capital of a province which in the days of old was one of the granaries of the East, and which under a reformed administration might again aspire to its former greatness. Nor do the possibilities—commercial and otherwise—of Seistan escape the notice of the few men at Simla, London, or Petrograd whose business it is to direct the moves on the great chess-board of international politics in Asia; for over this same dilapidated, overgrown village fly the consular flags of Russia and England.

The first stage of our five hundred miles to Meshed lay across the Hamun, a great shallow lake formed by the Helmund, and lying just to the west of Nasratabad. Our camels would cross by the main caravan route, where the lake was dry, or nearly so; we ourselves would be ferried over by raft on a more direct line where the water was deeper. As the camels in crossing would take two days to our one, they were sent ahead to await our arrival on the other side, under the charge of Abdul—the last service he would be able to perform for me—and the new *sarwan*.

Two mornings later Khuda-Dad and myself, mounted respectively on mule and horse, and flanked by an escort of Indian *sowars* who were to take us as far as the Hamun, rode away from the British Consulate, whose kind hospitality I had enjoyed during my stay in Nasratabad.

And it is in these departures from, or arrivals at, the oases of civilisation which lie on his path that the traveller in the East finds all the effects of extreme

contrast. For weeks he is a ragamuffin of the road, eating and living roughly, sheltering in unclean caravanserais, rejoicing in a freedom from shaving, clad in ancient and homely attire, his whole interests bounded by the next day's march, his next meal, or the condition of his animals. Then comes a considerable town, which has European consuls, men of business, a small cosmopolitan community. Out come his razors and off comes his beard. His consul extends to him the right hand of fellowship, and for a time he settles down to the life of civilised man, paying calls, having afternoon tea in drawing-rooms, playing tennis of an evening, clothing himself in purple and fine linen for dinner, sleeping between sheets, and through the exertions of the amiable Mr. Reuter gathering to himself the news of the great world without. But soon the time for departure comes round, and once more he drops back upon the road, and upon a way of life which is so far removed from the twentieth century that it even includes amongst its characters that old-fashioned individual, the highway robber.

For indeed an encounter with this sinister personage cannot be overlooked by the traveller in the East as part of the price he may have to pay for his wanderings. Some routes are more dangerous than others, but on most is an off-chance of an unpleasant encounter (*vide* my brush with the Bedouin footpads near Damascus). On arrival in Seistan I was sorry to hear—through Reuter's medium—that a brother officer, who had indeed contemplated making the present trip with me but had afterwards changed his route, had been assaulted and robbed by a gang of marauders near Ispahan. A short time after some

Turkomans laid a *chappao* (ambush) for an English official of the Indo-European Telegraph Company between Meshed and Teheran, killed two of his men, and took him prisoner. They afterwards released him, but kept all his goods. And every six months or so brings round its attack of robbers on individual foreign travellers, to say nothing of those on native caravans.

With five good men and true at his back the traveller could wend his way over most roads with an easy mind, for if it came to 'robbery under arms' he could at any rate render a good account of himself. But it is just these five good men and true that he lacks. Should a traveller be attacked he is usually either travelling without escort—the road being presumably safe—or with a few mounted policemen supplied by the local administration, and these latter, naturally enough, are not prepared to fight to the death either for a traveller or for his possessions. So it is this feeling of helplessness in case robbers should be met with which is so disconcerting, and which takes away from the traveller some of his pleasure in his wayfaring. But after a time he acquires a sort of philosophy in the matter. He realises that it is a case of no robbers, no travelling. Civilisation gives the tourist railways, hotels, and security, but not the open road—not travelling, but touring. If one must needs be a traveller one must take the risks of the profession. In more civilised communities people take their risks out hunting, playing polo or Rugby football, motoring, aeroplaning, mountaineering, and the like. The traveller takes his on the road. *Voilà tout.*

I thought I had exhausted most of the modes of

Eastern progression, but the crossing of the Hamun introduced me to a new one—the *tutin*, to wit. The *tutin* is a reed raft, constructed by the *sayads*, a curious semi-amphibious tribe who make a living by catching wildfowl and fish on the great lake. It floats almost awash with the water, and is as cranky as an outrigger. The one provided for our passage did not look capable of bearing Rags, much less Khuda-Dad, myself, our luggage, and the *sayad* who was to punt us across. However, we all got gingerly on board; contrary to expectation the *tutin* did not sink, and the *sayad* shoved off.

Our course led through a water-way bounded by a high forest of reeds, which, except for such paths as we were on, cover a greater part of the lake. We took nearly three hours to cross, and a very pleasant three hours they were too. I made myself comfortable with a rug and my back against a *yakdan*, smoked, had lunch, and drowsed the time away. On either side the green grew so tall that above only a narrow ribbon of sky was left to view, and ahead only a narrow avenue of channel, up which we glided, breaking the quiet reflections of the reeds into a thousand ripples. There was no sound save the steady plash, plash of the *sayad's* pole, and sometimes the quack of a wild duck from some secure retreat near by. Now and then other water-ways diverged, and now and then we met other *tutins*, for the most part larger than ours, on which were cunningly tied down donkeys, and even cattle.

On the other bank was Abdul, smiling a welcome as usual, with Janda and Majuj; Yajuj had gone forward to the serai with the new *sarwan*.



PERSIAN SOLDIERS ON THE ROAD



A WAYSIDE MEAL

Having disembarked, we loaded up, procured a *sayad* as a guide to the serai, said good-bye to Abdul —with a very real regret on my part, and I think, too, on that of Khuda-Dad, for he and the orderly had become great friends—mounted, and rode off, reaching the *manzil* about two hours after dark: a long day, but an easy one.

Next morning we were up betimes, with a dreary march before us over the *dasht* (stony plain) which lay between us and our next *manzil*, Bandan by name. Rags, who over the Baluchistan desert had sometimes to be picked up and carried in front of his master, was now in hard training, and trotted beside us for the whole thirty miles.

At Bandan the Deputy-Governor of the district had come to meet me with an escort, as the road northwards for some marches was liable to Baluchi raids, some idea as to the extent of which may be gathered from the fact that, not long ago, twelve hundred Baluchis attacked and looted the town of Neh, situated about one hundred and thirty miles south of Birjand, on the direct road to Seistan. My surprise on hearing of raiding on this gorgeous scale was somewhat abated, however, when I learnt that there was not a single regular soldier in the whole of the province—Teheran having omitted to send their pay for some considerable time past—and that my escort had been most kindly provided from his own personal attendants by His Excellency the Governor of Kain.

A room in one of the village houses had been set apart for my use. It was of course quite devoid of furniture, and the mud floor was bare of any covering, but in half an hour it presented quite a different

appearance. My strip of carpet had been unrolled, my camp-table bearing a travelling-lamp, books, and papers, my camp-bed with Rags curled up in possession of it, and my *yakdans* and saddle-bags were set against the walls. For ornaments, a gun leant in one corner, a rifle in the other.. A fire crackled bravely on the hearth, before which a chair had been drawn up, and in it, with his hands and limbs outstretched towards the blaze, and a cup of boiling hot cocoa at his elbow, reposed your most obedient and humble servant.

Such accommodation, when the village is not large enough to boast a caravanserai, can be had almost all over Persia—and all over Asia Minor too for the matter of that. So, unless indeed one aspires to the exploration of unknown tracts, that white elephant of the traveller, his tent—which adds to his baggage, needs pitching and unpitching daily, and is at best a protection inferior to the rudest of houses against heat and cold—is generally unnecessary.

Our march from Bandan was as dreary as the one which preceded it, save that it lay over some low hills and that I managed to shoot a few partridge ; but the one of the day after was relieved by an incident which was not without its elements of humour. We were approaching some wells, which lay about half-way to the next *manzil*, and round which a large flock of sheep and goats were grazing, when suddenly the Deputy-Governor dug his stirrups into his pony's sides—the stirrup being pointed serves for a spur throughout Persia—and scuttled ahead, followed by the escort.

' Hullo ! ' I thought to myself ; ' nomad marauders on the prowl,' and I hitched my pistol-holster round to a more convenient position.

But if there were any robbers in the neighbourhood we were of their company, for in not much longer time than it takes to write it the Deputy-Governor and his merry men were off their mounts and had secured a fine fat sheep. This the escort slew, skinned, cut up, and had roasting over a fire in the most expeditious manner possible. Anon they ate it, securing the most dainty portions for their leader, who courteously invited me to partake. I might have had scruples; perhaps I should have had scruples, but after all, so I quibbled to myself, my refusal would never be ascribed to its proper cause—my high principles—but would doubtless give offence. Who was I, forsooth, to sit in judgment on a Deputy-Governor moving as such through his own district? For aught I knew, this picking up of a fat sheep by the roadside might be one of his privileges as administrator of the 'high, the middle, and the low justice.' In any case the animal was now mutton; nothing could alter that. Moreover, the air was keen, so was my appetite, and the *kabobs* (balls of roasted meat) smelt infernally enticing. In short, I fell to, ate heartily, and—acting on the precepts of a certain famous traveller—as to the rights or wrongs of the matter asked no questions 'for conscience' sake.' Later I compromised by giving the shepherd something in the shape of *backshish*, though whether it ever found its way to the proper owner of the animal, who after all was not the shepherd but his master, is more than doubtful.

It was all very Persian, very much as if it had come straight out of the pages of the immortal Hajji Baba of Ispahan, a copy of which even now was securely packed away with the few books I had brought

with me on the road. To read Hajji Baba in Europe is to read an amusing tale; to read him in India is to obtain a new insight into native life in general; but to have him as a travelling companion in Persia itself is to possess a guide-book, not for sights and places, but for things far more interesting—the people themselves, with their ways, their customs, their whole outlook upon life.

At Neh the redoubtable Hajji again gave me chapter and verse for my guidance in things Persian. Here I had a visitor who afterwards sent me a small present of fruit, which I accepted with a polite note of thanks.

'But the present?' said Khuda-Dad.

'The present?'

'Yes, *Jenab* (Your Excellency—equivalent to the Hindustani 'Sahib'); the servant who brought the *mewa* (fruit) expects a present. Such is the custom in Iran.'

Then I remembered. For what said the doctor, Mirza Ahmak, to Hajji Baba when the latter asked him for a salary? And what were the feelings of the doctor himself when he had to disburse five *tomans* (about £1) to the Shah's running footman for bringing him a gift of *two partridges*? So I sent out the requisite present, but could not help imagining to myself how this custom would go amongst us Westerns. For instance:

Mr. Brown: 'What's that, James? You say you have received no wages for the last month?'

James (the butler), stiffly: 'Yes, sir.'

Mr. Brown: 'Oh, well—take a leg of mutton round to Mr. Smith with my compliments.' . . .

From Neh, up wide valleys, flanked by bare hills, past little brown villages with dome-shaped houses and desolate gardens and orchards, bearing now only forlorn leafless trees, we marched day by day into winter. Cold winds blew, pools upon the road were frozen over of a morning, and we were glad to reach at length the kindly shelter of the British Vice-Consulate at Birjand.

At Birjand a second of my camels went lame, and this time it was the peerless Janda, the flower of the flock, the apple of my eye, who developed some mysterious swellings on his fore-legs—mysterious, because they came after two days' rest, and therefore could not have been due to the fatigues of the road.

Anxiously I called in native experts, men from whom no ailment of that lusty-seeming yet in reality delicately-constituted beast, the camel, was hid. These —after the fashion of experts all the world over—wagged their heads wisely, talked much, and disagreed systematically. Yet on this were they unanimous: that though there was, praise be to God, no permanent *aib* (ailment, hurt) in the *mari*, nevertheless it would be at least twenty days before he would be fit for the road. Twenty whole days out of my six months, and I with the Meshed, Teheran, Ispahan, and Bushire road still to traverse! Here was a pretty pickle!

However, if from previous experience I had learnt nothing else of the art of Eastern travel, this had been ground into me as a first principle—patience, patience, and yet again patience; also that the Oriental is a confirmed Job's comforter, and delights to wring your withers, even supposing he has no ulterior motive of his own, with prophecies of gloom. So for my own

peace of mind I divided the twenty days by two, and the event proved that I was right. On the eleventh day I was able to say good-bye to my kind hosts, and to strike out upon the Meshed road, though very slowly, as Janda, treading delicately, like Agag, could only go at a walk for the first few stages.

And it was in the first two stages that we encountered some of the rigours of winter wayfaring: on the first day snow over the Saman Shah Pass, and on the second a storm of sleet and rain. The snow in reality was not an unmixed evil. The fall had not been a deep one, and the frost crisped and held it together, so that it afforded a firm foothold to the soft pads of my animals. The sun shone bright, and under it what a welcome difference did that great white mantle make to the ugly landscape which had accompanied us all the way from Seistan, hiding up the naked hillsides, spraying the trees of the village gardens with delicate foliage, and turning each little dome-shaped house into a miniature ice-palace.

I beguiled the time too, as was my wont, in conversation with Khuda-Dad. To beguile the time by converse with one's 'bearer' may sound a little strange to Anglo-Indian ears—I know it would have to mine before I began my travels. But firstly, the retainer of one's wayfarings, jogging beside one on horse- or camel-back for hundreds of miles, for months at a time, sharing alike the hardships and hazards of the road, occupies quite a different niche in one's appreciation from the creature in cantonments, who merely assists in valeting one twice a day and then disappears into the unsavoury depths of the servants' quarters behind the bungalow. And secondly, the



A GATE IN BIRJAND



Persian is essentially an *homme d'esprit*, possessed of imagination, quick sympathies, wit, and a sense of humour ; and it is this combination which makes him such a pleasant companion, even supposing him to lack other qualities as a man of affairs.

Now Khuda-Dad can neither read nor write, but he can tell me long stories in which the great Rustum with his horse Ruksh, and the saintly Ali with his sword, Zulfikar, and a whole miscellany of Dervishes—he is one himself, by the way—kings, jinns, and what not, each play their appointed parts. He can discuss shrewdly and intelligently the customs and manners of East and West, as they have come under his observation during his travels—for I am not his first sahib—and can round off a sentence with a quotation from Firdausi or Sheikh Sadi. In a way I endeavour to use Khuda-Dad as a sort of stalking-horse for ethnological study, and by a process of *ab uno disce omnes* to get, through him, an idea of Persian character in general.

To return to our travels. If something could be said for our day over the snow, nothing could be for our march through the rain and sleet. A bitter wind blew the whole way, hurling the icy drops into our faces, soaking us and numbing us from head to toe. Our animals hour after hour slowly slithered their way through the mud, for the camel's progress over wet ground is not unlike that of a tyro on skates, and it was a very woebegone caravan that came to rest that night in its caravanserai. In fact, between ourselves, one of the party would have exchanged all the 'romance of the open road' for the most prosaic of snug hearthsides.

But with 'a little warmth, a little light'—and

the next day was fine and clear—all the old illusions returned, and the snug hearthside faded away until the next wet day, and I would not have exchanged my seat on Janda's back, smoking an old briar, for the throne of the Czar of All the Russias.

So we travelled northwards to Gunabad, which lies three marches south of the town of Turbat-i-Haidari, and seven marches south of Meshed. Here I saw the Passion Play, which however merits a chapter to itself.

Up to now we had travelled without escort, but from here for a few stages the road bore an evil reputation, chiefly on the strength of the deeds of one Mohammed Ali—outlaw, now deceased. This enterprising individual had held a fort at the small hamlet of Amrani, one march north of Gunabad, from which he took toll of all caravans passing up and down; and, since the main Meshed road ran past his front door, he reaped a rich harvest. On one occasion the Governments of Meshed and Birjand made common cause against him with a not inconsiderable force, accompanied by guns, but the siege proved unsuccessful. Later, however, what open force could not do was accomplished by treachery, and the outlaw was murdered by one of his own men.

But though Mohammed Ali slept with his fathers, there were others of his kidney about, and I had been warned at Birjand that an escort would be advisable as far as Maina, one march beyond Amrani. But here came the difficulty. The Deputy-Governor of Gunabad —like the Governor of Kain—had no regular soldiers, and for precisely the same reason. However, after some delay and difficulty, five raffish-looking riders

were impressed, who, I understood, were responsible in a vague way for the safety of the road, and to these I was entrusted as far as Maina.

On the way I entered into conversation with the escort. They complained that though they acted as road-guards they had received no pay for the last year. But how then did they make a living, I asked. 'Oh, one way and another'—here they seemed secretly amused at something best known to themselves. They escorted caravans up and down the road, for instance, and thus made a few *tomans*. But, *W'Allah*, it was a hard life. Were there any robbers on the road just now? No; at present the road was *amán* (safe). 'But in any case,' said their leader with an engaging smile, 'all the robbers are my friends. Why, I used to be one of Mohammed Ali's men.' Not otherwise might a veteran of Napoleon have boasted that he had served under the great captain.

Thus it transpired—what I afterwards verified to be the case—that my five worthies, or at any rate three or four of them, had been local highwaymen of some repute, whom the Government, being unable to bring them to book, had turned into road-guards. This is a common practice all over Iran, and dates at least as far back as the time of Nadir Shah, who began life as a brigand. Indeed, what says the Persian proverb?—'Duzd ne giriftah padshah ast' (The uncaught thief is a king).

On arrival at Amrani my uncaught thieves evidently considered themselves to be kings in their own right, and swaggered about the village with loud voices, hectoring the poor yokels right and left.

Presently Khuda-Dad came to my room to say

that the escort wanted money for the day's expenses, notwithstanding that a definite bargain had been struck that they were to receive no payment until Maina was reached. However, being willing to humour them, I told Khuda-Dad to disburse a small sum.

Peace for a while, then more loud talk without: the escort were evidently trying to bully Khuda-Dad, who entered to me anon, looking somewhat scared.

'These sons of burnt fathers want more money, a *toman* or two each. What are we to do, *Jenab* ?'

That was just the crux. What *were* we to do? Naturally I was angry, and as naturally my inclination was to tell these 'sons of burnt fathers' to go to the devil. But our situation had to be considered. Here we were, at nightfall, boxed up in a small lonely village with our truculent escort. Ahead of us was a march of more than thirty miles over complete desert which bore a bad reputation for robbers. Supposing I told the escort to go to the devil, they might easily adopt the alternative of going back to Gunabad and leaving me to get to Maina as best I could. Or they might wait until I was well on my way next day and then materialise in their old guise of highwaymen. Or, if they did not wish to embroil *themselves*, they might give the office to some of their brigand friends, and afterwards share the spoils. Or they might then and there attempt a *coup de force*. I do not say that I thought any of these alternatives—except the first —was likely, but they had to be weighed and considered.

On the other hand, supposing I yielded once more to their demands, it would be a very evident confession of weakness, and would probably encourage them to



BIRJAND



EN ROUTE

further blackmail, either in an hour's time or next morning, or in the middle of our next day's march. By showing a firm front I might nip the 'mutiny' in the bud, or at any rate bring matters to a head and find out where I stood. I finally decided upon the latter course. So I had up my rapscallions and rated them soundly, pointing out that I had, through pure kindness of heart, given them money to which they were not entitled by the terms of our contract, in addition to tea, sugar, bread, and other trifles. And now were they so utterly without shame that they kept asking for more? Not another farthing should they have until we reached Maina, and they could take it or leave it at that.

To my great relief this harangue had an excellent effect. With one accord all five lifted up their voices and called upon their Maker to witness that I, that Khuda-Dad, had completely misunderstood them; that they wanted nothing more, nothing at all; that they were ready to take me not only to Maina, but to Meshed, to Teheran, to wherever I had an inclination to go. And finally—after many protestations of good-will and penitence—at what hour would my Excellency wish to start on the morrow?

This was all as it should be, and I fell asleep that night with a more or less easy mind.

Nevertheless the next day's march was not a pleasant experience. Though my common sense told me that any attempt at robbery and violence was so remote as to be not worth thinking about, my imagination was not so well behaved and played me tricks. Wherefore—with the aid of my Winchester, which lay across the saddle before me—I endeavoured

to keep an eye on my guard of honour. Now, to watch five men, mounted on horses, lest they should have evil intent upon you, over thirty miles of desert, with a sharp winter wind blowing the while, you yourself being perched upon an unwieldy camel, is trying both physically and mentally. I was not sorry therefore when at long last we reached Maina just as the sun went down. There I paid off the escort, who returned to Gunabad, to await doubtless the arrival of other unhappy travellers. As for us, we made another forced march the next day—Christmas Eve—into Turbat-i-Haidari.

At Turbat, Janda, poor beast, who had been faltering for the last few marches, again fell sick. Again I consulted experts, who once more were of the opinion that for him there would be no travel for some weeks. But not again could I afford a long delay, so, leaving him behind with the *sarwan* to follow to Meshed when he should recover, I hired a donkey in his place, and set forth.

From the lordly Janda to the humble ass was indeed a come-down, and of my caravan of four camels and three retainers which had left Nushki two months ago only Khuda-Dad and myself, Yajuj and Majuj, were left. Thus had the road taken toll of us.

Of our journey from Turbat to Meshed there is nothing to record. Snow and steep passes were the order of the day, and consequently long hours between stages. As a sign of approaching civilisation I met again my old friend of Turkish Arabia and Syria—the wayside *khawa-khana*, with its fragrant tea for the refreshment of the traveller. And then one afternoon, from a spot whence the pilgrim gets his first view of the

holy city, and where he raises a prayer of thankfulness for his safe arrival and piles a few stones together as a commemoration of the fact, far below us —for we were high on the hill-tops—we saw a dark mass spread out on the plain, and in its midst something which gleamed a dull white. That mass was Meshed, and the dull white the great Shrine of Iman Riza.

Our pilgrimage was over.

CHAPTER X

THE TRAGEDY OF KARBALA

It was at Gunabad, mentioned in the last chapter but one, that I saw the great Persian Passion Play. Our arrival was in the sacred month of Moharram, during which the Persians, and indeed all Shia Mohammedans throughout the East, celebrate the mourning for Hussain, slain at Karbala twelve hundred years ago ; in fact, the morrow was the *Ruz-i Qatl,* or Day of Slaughter, the tenth and final day of the festival, when the Passion Play itself would be enacted. For these ten days all business, including that of travelling, is suspended, and my servants, pointing out that we had broken the festival in part by being on the road during the past week, made a petition that we might at any rate acquire some small merit by making a halt of a day or two and observing the *Ruz-i-Qatl.*

I had already endured delays not a few—who has not, in a long overland journey in the East ?—but after all, the Moharram only came once a year, and it would distinctly savour of tyranny to force my attendants to travel on such a day. He is, moreover, a foolish traveller who cannot humour his followers every now and then. So I graciously granted their petition, and was the more ready to do so as we were settled in comfortable quarters—a school, to wit, now deserted

by pupils during the Moharram, built around a courtyard, shut out from the turmoil of the streets by high walls and keeping a very pleasant air of seclusion.

In the afternoon, according to custom, I intimated to the Governor of the Gunabad district, who resided in Gunabad itself, that I would do myself the honour of calling on him, whenever he might be at leisure. In return he replied that, owing to the Moharram, to-day, if I would excuse him, he could not receive me, but to-morrow, if I would honour him with a visit, he would be much pleased. In the meantime here was a sheep, as a token of his esteem, which would I condescend to accept? And finally my camels (housed in a neighbouring caravanserai) had been much admired, as they were riding, not baggage animals, and would I be so kind as to lend them for the festival processions?

The sheep was a very welcome addition to our larder, and I was only too willing to lend my beasts, as it enabled me to counter with the proposal that I should be present at the *Tazea* (Passion Play) the next day. After a little delay the answer was returned that there would be no objection to this, and that a man from the Governor himself would attend on the morrow to take me to the play. So that was satisfactorily arranged.

Before going further it must be explained that in the Moharram celebrations there are two main parts. The first consists of assembling in mosques, crying upon the names of Ali, Hassan, and Hussain, and beating upon the breast—a very old signification of Oriental grief—reading out to congregations tales and sermons on the tragedy of Karbala, processions through the streets, and the like. This part takes place in the first

nine days alluded to above. On the tenth day is what we may call the Passion Play proper, a representation of the death of Hussain and his family. It was this latter which I was going to see next day.

But celebrations of the first order were not yet over. The school stood next the town mosque, and, as the darkness closed in, from it the shuffling of many feet and the murmur of many voices came muffled to my ears through the thickness of the intervening walls. Then the nasal Arabic chant of a *mulla*, and then a single voice crying aloud the name of Ali. Back came the response from the crowd, 'Hussain,' but uneven and straggling, like the dropping fire of musketry. 'Ali,' again cried the single voice, and back again the echo, 'Hussain,' this time stronger, more even, 'Ali' —'Hussain,' 'Ali' — 'Hussain,' 'Ali' — 'Hussain.' They were swinging together now. 'Ali'—'Hussain,' 'Ali'—'Hussain,' 'Ali'—'Hussain,' 'Ali'—'Hussain.' They were no longer voices which cried 'Hussain,' but one unanimous shout from hundreds of throats—deep, savage, menacing, like the coughing roar of a lion, smashing the stillness of the night into a thousand fragments. 'Ali'—'Hussain,' 'Ali'—'Hussain.' And a fresh sound had taken its place in the symphony, for with the 'Hussain' came a dull, reverberating thud, the sound of hands striking upon the breasts of their owners. 'Ali'—'Hussain,' 'Ali'—'Hussain.' Deeper, more savage, more menacing, crashed out that harsh requiem. 'Ali'—'Hussain,' 'Ali'—'Hussain.'

I think I could without difficulty obtain a written testimonial from most of my friends that I am of a fairly placid temperament, one whose nervous system is in excellent order. So I have no hesitation in con-

fessing that I was not unaffected by such a volume of sound, or that its hammer-like reiteration did not fail to rasp my nerves. For besides the recognised effects on the human soul of music, with its wailing violins and deep-mouthed organs, Nature too has her orchestras, at times not less moving, with her inexorable breakers grinding upon shingle, her storms tearing their way through high forests. And of all, perhaps the effect of the human voice, when it takes upon itself some inhuman function and imitates these great orchestras, is most harrowing.

'Ali'—'Hussain,' 'Ali'—'Hussain.' High above the crashing bass rose the treble of boys' voices, shrill and hysterical. But indeed the note of abandonment, of frenzy, had crept into the whole. Discordant cries began to sweep across the steady refrains, like eddies across a river in full flood. I felt as if I were, in imagination, watching a strand, woven of sound and emotion, being stretched tighter, and tighter, and tighter to breaking-point.

Then of a sudden, to my relief, the strand snapped, and the shouts of 'Ali'—'Hussain' ceased, giving place to low incoherent ejaculations, in the exhausted tones of spent men. But after a pause the maddening, monotonous refrain began again, 'Ali'—'Hussain,' 'Ali'—'Hussain,' irregular at first, gathering strength with repetition, stretching a strand of emotion and sound tighter, tighter, and tighter to breaking-point, until once more it snapped; when again ensued the low incoherent ejaculations of spent men. For a third time the ritual was opened, swelled again, and again ceased, but this time for good and all, and left me in peace in my quiet courtyard, with the silent night for company

and the minarets of the mosque rising against the stars. . . .

For the understanding of the Passion Play a general knowledge of the main events which lead up to the tragedy it commemorates is necessary. The following short synopsis gives the necessary data, and there is the less need of excuse for introducing such a synopsis as to the general reader it will possibly be new ground, and because, unless one has some such knowledge, not only the Passion Play but the whole of the Mohammedan East of the present day, its schisms, its cross-currents, and its motives must remain a closed book.

When Mohammed died in A.D. 632, Abu Bakr became Khalif, or Emperor, of Islam, and on his death was succeeded by Omar, who in turn was followed by Osman. When the latter fell by the hand of the assassin in A.D. 656, Ali, Mohammed's son-in-law, was elected Khalif by the people of Mecca and Medina. Syria, however, under the governorship of Muawiya, refused allegiance, as did the important province of Busra, at the head of the Persian Gulf. The latter Ali brought to submission, but Syria remained stubborn until his assassination in A.D. 661, when Muawiya became Khalif, having bought off the claims of Hassan, Ali's eldest son, by settling upon him various enormous revenues. Hassan, a pious, easy-going, unambitious sensualist, lived in retirement, taking no part in public affairs, until the year A.D. 670, when he was poisoned by his wife. Part of the agreement between Hassan and Muawiya had been that on the death of the latter the government should revert to the family of the former. But when Muawiya died, in A.D. 680, his son Yazid seized the khalifate, thus ousting Hussain—

Hassan's brother—from his just rights. The people of Busra, however, and notably the inhabitants of the important city of Kufa, sent messages to Hussain, as on a former occasion they had sent them to Ali, that if he would but show himself amongst them they would unanimously rise in his favour. The only force which Hussain, who was then in Mecca, could induce to accompany him in his bid for the khalifate of Islam was a small band of seventy-two devoted adherents. His friends strongly advised him against proceeding any further with such a hazardous undertaking, but, disregarding all their admonitions, Hussain set forth at the head of his caravan—for it was in reality little else, encumbered moreover with women and children—to fight for a great empire. Doubtless he was inspired by the issue of a like proceeding on the part of his father, who had marched to Busra with a totally inadequate force, and had ended by winning the Kufans over to his side.

On nearing Kufa, Hussain learned that his envoy, whom he had sent ahead to try the temper of the people, after meeting with some preliminary success, had been seized and beheaded. Other news from the city went to show that the fickle Kufans, whatever might be their secret sympathies, had no intention of putting them into practice by a rising in favour of Hussain; and even before the appearance of four thousand men under Amr and Shimar, sent by Obaidullah—the Governor of Busra—it was evident that the cause of the house of Ali was a lost one; and to convince Hussain that he was a doomed man it needed not his sister's lamentations: 'My mother Fatima is dead, and my father Ali, and my brother

Hassan. Alas for the destruction that is past, and the dregs of it that remain behind.'

Negotiations were opened between the two forces, but with no results. Obaidullah instructed his lieutenants, Amr and Shimar, to offer but the two alternatives: unconditional surrender or a fight to the last. And Hussain and his dauntless handful, tying their tents together to form a barricade on one side, and digging a trench for the same purpose on the other, chose the latter.

The next morning a small reinforcement came for the devoted garrison. One Al Hurr deserted the standards of Amr, and with thirty men came over to Hussain. Soon after the battle was joined.

According to the ancient practice, it began with single combats between the opponents, in which the champions of the Imam were victorious, seeing which the enemy made a combined attack, and the engagement became general. Hopelessly outnumbered, subjected to a rain of arrows from which their weak defences afforded little or no protection, racked by burning thirst—for their water supply had given out, and the enemy had interposed between them and the Euphrates, which flowed near by their camp—their plight made all the more poignant by the presence of their women and children, the followers of Hussain, encouraged by the deeds and the voice of their intrepid and beloved leader, fought with an indomitable courage which has given that day at Karbala so many centuries ago a lasting niche in the Temple of Fame. But no valour could prevail against such odds. One by one the Imam's warriors fell, sword in hand. Hussain himself, in a desperate attempt to cut his way

to the river to bring water for his parched garrison, was surrounded and cut down, and by the time that the evening shadows had begun to creep over the stricken field, the darker Shadow of Death—except for the women and children, whose fate it was to fall into a captivity of insult and degradation—had passed completely over the little band of heroes.

It is the tragedy of Karbala which is the theme of the Persian Passion Play, and the extraordinary effect it has on the people—an effect testified to by almost every traveller in Iran—is due to the three great feelings which it touches and harps upon, namely, religion, national pride, and a very human feeling for a tragic event. Religion, since the Shias execrate Abu Bakr Omar, and Osman and the remainder of the khalifs, and maintain that Ali and his eleven descendants (whom they call the twelve Imams) were the true successors of Mohammed. This is of course in direct opposition to the tenets of the Sunnis, and the hatred between these two sects can best be described by saying that not uncommonly they barely regard each other as Muslims at all. National pride, since Hussain was the husband of a Persian princess of royal blood, and therefore represents the Persian nation of the day, conquered and thrown in the dust by the victorious Arabs. As for the feeling of sympathy with a tragic event, there are few, if any, more 'splendid failures' in history, or which have more legitimate claims on human sympathy, than that of Karbala. . . .

The next morning I witnessed another of the rituals connected with the festival—a religious procession, as it surged by the door of my courtyard. First came a motley band bearing flags and banners, then a com-

pany of men beating themselves with chains, and then the representations for the martyrs, as those that fell at Karbala are called: a riderless steed for the fallen Imam; three or four other horses with children strapped on their backs, covered with chaff and ashes —these, the infants that were present that day at Karbala; my camels, stalking superciliously along, bearing men dressed as women to represent Zainab, Hussain's sister, Shah-i-Banu, his wife, and the other women led into captivity to Syria. Then swung past a frenzied line of swordsmen, dressed all in white flowing robes, flashing their weapons in the air, and ever and anon cutting themselves about the head, so that the blood streamed over their vestments, all the while shouting and progressing with grotesque leaps and bounds. Some poor wretches were so faint with loss of blood that they were almost unconscious. Friends kept pace with the line, bearing cloths in their hands with which every now and then they wiped away the accumulated gore from the faces of the fanatics.

Taken in all, the sight was not a pretty one, and indeed left me with an uneasy feeling as to the advisability of my attending the Passion Play. Those frenzied shouts of the night before, those demented swordsmen with their flashing blades, passed through my mind. How would the populace, in their present excited state, look upon the presence of a European at this, one of their most sacred observances? Many Christians of course had witnessed the Passion Play, but generally from the security of a neighbouring house belonging to some Persian friend, or, if from among the crowd itself, under the protection of some local

notable of importance; and in either case nearly always in some large town whose inhabitants were accustomed to the sight of Europeans. I, however, had practically none of these advantages. Gunabad was a place where no Europeans lived, and through which only a stray traveller, like myself, passed now and then, at the rate, perhaps, of two or three in the year. No protecting roof for me, to boot, but the company of the spectators, as one of themselves. It was true that the Governor had offered me his ægis—two of his followers would come to conduct me to the play—but the protection of a small Persian official, who, as I discovered later, had not even enough men to afford me an escort for my forward journey, would in time of trouble probably prove to be far from a very present help.

However, it was too late to draw back now. So at the appointed hour I donned my frock-coat—for any occasion of ceremony the Persian considers the display of leg in ordinary European dress indecent—put a Browning pistol in the tail-pocket in case of accidents, though common sense might have suggested not attending a performance at all where such a companion was thought to be necessary, and set out with my two guides.

Traversing the empty village—for all the inhabitants had flocked a-playgoing—we came upon the outskirts of a large crowd collected on the plain outside, passed through, and crossed towards a tent, where the Governor and some other of the leading men were seated on carpets spread upon the ground. I made my salutations, which were politely returned; a place was vacated for me next to the Governor; and squatting in my turn,

I was free to look around. The crowd was arranged in a great circle, a section of which—in white head-to-toe enveloping veils—represented the female spectators. In the centre was a small group, including women (i.e. men dressed as women) and children, which I had no difficulty in identifying as Hussain and his martyrs, hemmed in by their implacable foes. About the bare ring, between the spectators and Hussain's band, half a dozen horsemen wheeled and quartered. These were undoubtedly the ruthless couple, Shimar and Amr, at the head of their hosts, come hot-foot from Busra to accomplish their fell designs. Such was the stage, and such the setting.

Just after I had seated myself something of note had evidently occurred. On the far side of the ring a *mêlée* was in progress. Shimar's horsemen, dismounted, had surrounded and were driving hither and thither some Hussainite, who was evidently making a desperate resistance. Presently however they had him down, and one delivered the *coup de grâce* by a plunge of his dagger. Shouts of execration, sobs, cries, and groans rose from the crowd. When these subsided I whispered to my neighbour as to who the victim might be—'Al Hurr.' And his slayer ?—'Amr.' And that other in the long Russian boots ?—'Shimar.' And the player with the beringed Arab kerchief over his head and shoulders ?—'Hussain himself.' And the large man seated ?—'Abbas, Hussain's brother.' And the young man near him ?—'Ali-Akbar, Hussain's son.' And the women ?—'Hussain's wives, Ali-Akbar's sisters, &c.' And so on, until I had placed most of the dramatis personæ. But indeed there was not much immediate interest in the identification of

the players, for the play, at present, decidedly dragged. Shimar—in appropriately melodramatic form—delivered long and threatening harangues at Hussain, who replied in like fashion. Now and then the tale would be taken up by Abbas for Hussain, or by Amr for Shimar. Now and then one of the women would have her say.

Frankly speaking, I began to get bored. This slow interchange of interminable blank verse was hardly what I had expected, from the accounts of Europeans read or heard, who described the play as not unmoving, even for those of another race and religion. The absence also of any stage effects was strange to a Western mind. Stage there was of course none, but even the illusions within their compass the players seemed to despise. Thus Hussain's band, supposedly suffering from the tortures of burning thirst, sipped tea and smoked *qaleāns*. One little maiden from the company, suffering the pangs of real thirst, toddled out and received water from the hands of the hard-hearted Shimar. When the 'women's' veils were blown aside the beards and whiskers of men could be distinctly seen. All read their parts whenever they happened to forget them; all prompted each other, and were in turn prompted by the stage manager—a benevolent old gentleman, who was here, there, and everywhere in the execution of his office.

Nor did the spectators seem much interested—after their outburst at the death of Al Hurr—in the proceedings. They also had their *qaleāns*, and a steady bubbling rose all along the circle of the crowd. The Governor—a somewhat dissipated and *blasé*-looking young man—lighted a cigarette. The rest

of his company chatted to one another in low undertones.

People began to notice the presence of a Feringhi (European) amongst them, to nudge each other, and look in my direction. The process of being stared at is one to which any English traveller in the East must submit and if possible get hardened. But many years east of Suez has still left me somewhat sensitive on this point, and I began to feel slightly uncomfortable, especially when I considered the position in which I was. My legs grew cramped with squatting. Yes! I was undoubtedly becoming bored.

And then a change came over the scene. The time for speechifying was apparently past, and that for action come. Hussain bids farewell to his wife, and with a shout of grief and rage rushes on the foe—his water-skin on his back—evidently in the attempt to cut his way to the river, from which to bring water for his garrison. That shout rings true, as does the accompanying acclamation of the crowd. *Qaleāns* are dropped, and in place of their quiet monotonous bubbling low fierce mutterings run round the assembly. There is no lack of interest now.

And this gives me a juster appreciation of the play, and also of its spectators. The play is indeed no play to them, but a religious ceremony of the most solemn import, and as such any attempts at stage-effects would be completely out of place. The feelings which the play inspires are more caused by the remembrance of the real tragedy of long ago, and all that it means to a Shia Mohammedan, than by any excellence, or the reverse, in the particular performance presented to their gaze. A fine deed can stir a reader's feelings

through the bald terseness of a newspaper telegram, and so the tragedy of Karbala the feelings of a Persian, though the imagery of it be as inadequate as you please. Moreover, it is impossible for the emotions to be at white heat during a play that lasts some six hours —I had come in after some three hours and a half had passed—and in which the action is continuous, without any drops of the curtain. The interest of the spectators must of necessity come and go. Lastly, all these players were in no sense professional actors. They were not even as those of Karbala, Meshed, and Teheran, who receive large presents from wealthy patrons. They were merely humble village folk, taking a day's rest from the day's toil to play their parts in the representation of a great national epic.

So with these reflections uppermost I watch the performance with a more understanding eye. This (the performance) is now moving rapidly. Hussain is fighting single-handed for his life against the hosts of Shimar ; and the combat is represented not by the ridiculous two-up, two-down fencing one sees sometimes on the Western stage, but by the combatants twirling their swords this way and that above their heads, at the same time bending their bodies, advancing and retreating, the whole effect, once one allows the convention, being extremely graceful. The struggle is followed with breathless attention by the crowd ; the Governor's cigarette goes out ; the low-toned chatter of his suite ceases. Imperceptibly all around me I feel the tide of emotion rising slowly.

Soon Hussain is driven back to his devoted band. Once more he takes farewell of his family, but this time a long last farewell. Not again will he look

upon their faces in this life. His wives, his son, his little daughters—all receive embraces. Sobs and lamentations break from the crowd. It is true that tears shed on such occasions acquire religious merit, according to Shia belief, but it is also true that no fictitious spurs to emotion are really necessary. The situation has in itself ample and real pathos.

Before plunging again into the fray Hussain makes a last appeal to his foes, not for ultimate mercy—that he does not expect—but for a little water for his followers and for himself. In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, in the name of their common religion, in the name of humanity—water, water.

Shimar, with fiendish malevolence, lifts a bowl of water on high and spills it slowly on the ground before the eyes of the thirst-stricken garrison. A roar of rage goes up from the crowd. Even the only Christian and foreigner present feels that the wringing of Shimar's neck would give him not a little pleasure. Once more Hussain rushes single-handed on the foe. This way and that the battle sways. At length Hussain cuts his path through the enemy and disappears through the crowd on the far side of the circle.

A pause, then a cry of horror from the spectators as a blood-stained object is flung into the ring. It is the right hand of Hussain. The martyrdom of the Imam has commenced. With a shrill scream his daughter rushes forward, and seizing the terrible relic presses it to her bosom.

Presently the hero himself staggers back into the circle, but not the same warrior who had but now flashed forth in all the pride of his great strength.

His head is bare, his clothes torn and dishevelled, his face racked with pain. He is weak with the loss of blood and falters in his gait. His right hand is severed, but with indomitable courage he holds his sword in his left, and still continues the unequal struggle. His water-skin is still across his shoulders, and glistens with wetted surface: he has succeeded in filling it from the river. Beset as he is with foes, he tries to bear the precious fluid towards his people. But it is not to be, and fighting desperately he is borne backwards and forced out of the circle.

Again a cry of horror from the crowd as a second hand is flung into the arena, and again the daughter secures this ghastly relic of her father. And soon Hussain himself follows, a piteous spectacle indeed—both hands shorn off, now staggering forward, now dropping to his knees and crawling painfully, now lying out along the ground, too weak to move; but ever and always the water-skin slung about his shoulders, and ever the 'unconquerable soul' of the man urging him forward on his errand. Perhaps he may achieve it, for he has shaken off his pursuers. There is no sign of Shimar and his men. Slowly, inch by inch, he progresses, a forlorn figure on the sun-baked face of the arena, watched by hundreds of tense, staring eyes.

And the Feringhi—what of him? He forgets that Hussain died many centuries since. He forgets that religiously and racially the play, the players, and the spectators are alien to him, so alien that he has thought it necessary to have a pistol in his pocket. He forgets entirely the presence of the pistol. He only knows that he is watching a drama, a tragedy, in its own peculiar way as real, as true, as artistic, as any placed

on a Western stage, and, in its effect upon its audience and upon its actors, far more true and real—a tragedy calling to feelings deeper than religion, deeper even than race, deep down to those of human nature itself. So he watches with as intense eyes as any. . . .

But Hussain's fate is upon him, for presently Shimar and his horsemen are once more on the scene. At first far away in the desert, as one must imagine, for they course swiftly round and round. Nearer and nearer they come, spurning the miles beneath their hoofs, while that piteous crawling figure makes but its painful inches. Soon they are in sight of their prey, and raise a savage cry. Another round, and they are off their horses and upon him.

One merciful blow would end that life already ebbing, but Shimar knows no mercy. Not the sword does he use, but the scourge. Brutally he tears away the water-skin, casts it on the ground, and raises his whip on high. The blows fall. Under them the thing which has no longer the semblance of a man writhes and moans.

Among the spectators is a very frenzy of emotion. The screams of the women, the deeper shouts, sobs, and groans of the men, rise to heaven in one loud utterance of grief and rage. As for me, notwithstanding the heat of the afternoon sun, cold shivers steal up and down my spine, so indescribably painful is the scene, so terribly real the whirlpool of feeling which engulfs me on every side.

The scourge rises and falls. Hussain's moans become articulate. '*Baradar, Baradar!*' (Brother, brother!). He is calling upon Abbas. But Abbas is far away in his camp. '*Baradar, Baradar!*' The voice

gets stronger, until, with one last great cry, it is silent—for ever—and the body falls limply to the ground, and Hussain is dead.

It is the climax of the play, and the climax in the emotions of the spectators; and when the glamour dies away the reaction comes. *Qaleāns* once more begin to bubble, cigarettes once more are lighted, the buzz of conversation rises afresh. The Governor and his suite proceed to discuss the respective merits of the steeds of Shimar and his followers.

'*W'Allah*, but the grey is a good animal, fast and without *aib* (i.e. sound).' 'The black is better.' 'Never! Why, the grey is worth ninety *tomans*.' 'He is old, though.' 'Not more than eight years. 'How much does Abdul want for him?' 'One hundred *tomans*.' 'One hundred *tomans*? May God give it to him!—he won't get it from me.' (Laughter.)

It sounds strange after the sobs of five minutes before to hear this badinage tossed to and fro. But it only means that the Persian is possessed of that curious thing, the artistic temperament, whose necessity it is to feel deeply and quickly, but by no means continuously.

Once more the crowd is moved as Abbas mounts his horse, and scours the plain for Hussain, only to find his corpse. Then again, with Abbas back in camp, it resumes its *qaleāns* and gossip; deserts them for the killing of Ali Akbar; resumes them on his death, when the play comes to an end. There are still many of Hussain's band waiting for their martyrdom, but Ali Akbar, like the Merry Monarch, has taken a long time a-dying, and it is now close on sunset, when prayers have to be said and evening meals to be

cooked. So the Governor gives the word, and the assembly breaks up. Some of the actors, Hussain and Shimar amongst them, came over to our tent, and, saluting the Governor and myself, fell into amicable conversation. How did I like the play? It was not so good as at Meshed and Teheran of course? I hastened to express my entire approval of the Gunabad production. Where had I come from, and whither was I bound? From Seistan, and I was bound for Meshed, and after that to Teheran. Indeed? A long journey that, and winter was a bad season for travelling. They hoped the road would be good for my onward wayfaring. And so forth, and so on.

Nothing could have been more friendly or less fanatical than this bearing, and my only anxiety was lest the aforesaid pistol should betray itself by any unseemly bulge in my frock-coat, which after all was not originally constructed to carry such weapons of war.

And as I returned to the town, reflecting on what I had seen, it seemed to me that I had caught a glimpse —momentary though it had been—of something firm and abiding in a country probably fated to great changes; and this something was the spirit of a people. For whatever may be the fate of Persia as a nation—whether she remain independent, or pass eventually under foreign dominion—the spirit of the people, which can produce such a universal expression of itself as its Passion Play, will remain. And every year as the Moharram comes round, whatever government may rule in Teheran, the people will turn to that past, which in truth means more to them than any future, and will continually delight in the Tragedy of Karbala.

CHAPTER XI

MESHED TO ASKABAD

For all that Meshed is the possessor of a world-famous shrine, to the casual traveller the town is not of much interest, the more so as the shrine itself—that of Imam Riza—is not only closed to the inspection of the European, but even the approaches to it, by chains placed across the various bazaars leading thereto. And other buildings of note are non-existent. Placed in close proximity to Russian Central Asia and Northern Afghanistan, politically of course Meshed possesses many points of interest, but then this book is not a political treatise.

So, with the remark that I passed a very pleasant three weeks enjoying the hospitality of the British Consulate, we can 'skip' Meshed and strike the road once more, but minus one of our party—Khuda-Dad, for whom the attractions of the holy city had been too much, and who announced his intention, with suitable regret, of staying behind. Luckily enough, I managed to procure the services of a Persian, Teheran bound, as a domestic that far, and so substituted him for the faithless K.-D.

The direct way from Meshed to Teheran is of course by road through Northern Persia, and it was by this road that I had intended travelling. But on

arrival at Meshed I found that the road was infested by bands of Turkoman robbers, who plundered caravans, looted villages, cut telegraph wires, and generally harried the countryside. They had already attacked and robbed one English traveller, killing two of his men, and, as I had no wish to be the second victim, a change of route seemed to be advisable.

This change required the less cogitation as there was left me but one other alternative route: via Askabad, the Transcaspian Railway to the Caspian Sea, across it to Baku, thence down to Resht, and thence to Teheran—a devious route this, but safe from molesting brigands, and so, although the longest way round, in all probability the shortest way home.

From Meshed to Askabad, on the Transcaspian Railway, is about two hundred miles, and a carriage road connects the two places. This is the principal avenue of trade between Russian Central Asia and Khorasan, and merchandise is carried up and down it either by means of large caravans or great lumbering drays—'fourgons,' as they are locally called. The European traveller drives in a phaeton, and his luggage follows in a 'diligence,' a species of lighter fourgon.

By the efforts of some kind friends in Meshed I procured the services of one Daniel, who was to provide me with a phaeton, driven by himself, and a diligence, driven by a satellite of his. Daniel—with an accent on the last syllable—was a sturdy, grizzled, middle-aged man of, presumably, Russo-Central-Asian extraction, though what particular blend it would be difficult to say. At any rate he was no Persian, his efforts at the language being ludicrous, notwithstanding that he must have been driving up

and down the road any time for the past ten years. As his name implies, he was a Christian, though, as I found, this was in no way any check on his powers of 'cussing' when it was needful later to speed our passage through opposing traffic. For the rest, he had a good reputation on the road as a careful driver, and, as our way would lie up and down not a few hazardous slopes, this was something of an asset.

Special permission is required from the capital itself before a foreign traveller can use the Trans-caspian Railway, in addition of course to a Russian passport. This permission nowadays is always forth-coming, and on its arrival, with my passport in my pocket, I was ready to depart.

Figure to yourself, then, us leaving Meshed one fine morning at the end of February. First the phaeton with three horses, containing Rags and myself, Daniel handling the ribbons. Rags the old traveller, the follower of the fortunes of his master over so many leagues, had curled himself up at my feet with the most philosophic calm. North, south, east, or west, camel, carriage, mule, or train, it is all one to him, for he travels like royalty or the moneyed tourist—on personally conducted tours, while his master has the privilege of planning, arranging, haggling, and incidently trying to make both ends meet.

Following the phaeton at a respectable distance came the diligence with four horses, containing my baggage, my Persian servant, and Daniel's satellite. Notwithstanding its superior horse-power, the diligence was a slower moving vehicle than ours, made heavy way over the rough ground, and was soon left behind. The phaeton—a good one, mercifully supplied with

strong springs—swayed easily to and fro, except at some unusually bad lump. The day was a perfect one, with a warm sun and a cool breeze, and Rags and I, bound for pastures new, were once more on the road.

Speaking even with some degree of latitude, there is only one carriage road in Persia, and the Meshed-Askabad route is not this one and only—at any rate as long as it crosses Persian soil. The others—well, for the others imagine a bare plain, traversed by the roughest of unmetalled tracks, for which no preparation or levelling of any sort has been attempted. Now the track swerves to the right, now to the left, to avoid some exceptionally abrupt hollow or broad water-course. Now, taking its courage in both hands, it flies hollow and water-course in mid-career. After a moderate amount of snow or rain it becomes a slushy mass, through which your straining horses can barely pull you. After an immoderate amount of rain or snow it becomes an impassable quagmire. Of such, doubtless, were the old unregenerated coaching roads of Europe.

The carriage- is also the camel-track, but with this difference, that the latter is even more sinuous. For the camel is essentially a creature of the flat, and delights to make mountains out of molehills—though he can cross the former at need in a marvellous way. Thus his path is as sensitive to levels as running water, and it is amusing to see how it will break away and make a divergence of perhaps a hundred yards to avoid some paltry and infinitesimal incline.

So we bowled smoothly and steadily, or slowly and painfully—as the track was better or worse—through

the morning up to the hour of lunch, which I had in the *khawa-khana* of a wayside village; then to carriage again, and so on through the afternoon until dusk, when we reach the *manzil.*

The *manzils* from Meshed to Askabad contain small posts of Russian soldiers for the purpose of guarding the route, and are superior to those met with on most other roads. This is not to say that they equal the dak-bungalow of Hindustan, which one is rather inclined to revile until one comes to Persia and learns what the discomforts of real travelling may be. By no means; but the rooms have doors—which those in other caravanserais sometimes have not—and, having doors, are fairly air-tight and not more penetrable by draughts than can be checked by a stretched blanket. Sometimes, *mirabile dictu,* they even contain a table and a chair—carpets or other furnishings of course they never do. This was the case in our *manzil* for that night, which saved me the trouble of erecting my own camp furniture, except my bed, on which, no long time after the evening meal—for Daniel had promised an early start on the morrow—I got between the folds of my sleeping-bag, with Rags in his accustomed position as foot-warmer.

I awoke the next morning with a sense of sharp cold, to find my servant lighting the fire. A white powdery substance spangled him from head to foot.

'*Baraf*' (snow), he grunted laconically.

I was equally laconic—but the word I said was not *baraf*—and getting up to the door, looked out. Yes, it was snowing, and snowing hard, too—great fat flakes, following one another fast and furious. They must have started coming early during the night, for the

whole countryside was white. Down below in the courtyard Daniel was shovelling the snow from off the hood of the phaeton.

Again I said that short sharp word. Now swearing is a bad habit, chiefly because on the part of the traveller it indicates a want of that philosophic calm which should form part of the equipment of every real wayfarer ; but I had some excuse.

The first two days out from Meshed, until the town of Kuchan is reached, are over flat country. You then begin to ascend, and go over mountain passes some 6000 feet in height. Here snow in winter may rightly be expected, and received by the traveller without strong language. Snow falls from time to time in the low country itself, but if it does so, what must you look forward to over the mountains ? We had started in such fine weather, too. However, it was no good crying over spilt milk, or falling snow, so I made my simple toilet—one does not unrobe excessively for the night when winter travelling in Persia—swallowed my hot cocoa, and after an interval to allow of the diligence being loaded up we started off.

For the time we made fair progress. The track was comparatively good—the snow had not had time to settle very deep—but towards noon the wind began to rise, and when we stopped at a village *khawa-khana* for lunch, and to let the diligence catch us up, it was blowing half a blizzard. By the time that the diligence did eventually arrive the storm was in full blast. The satellite who drove the diligence, since his was the slower craft and would be the last to reach port, not unnaturally wished to postpone our sailing until the morrow. My servant, since he was in the same boat

with the satellite, was of the same opinion. They had words with Daniel, who wished to start immediately.

Daniel replied in suitable terms, and the three stood, a comic sight enough, in the falling snow, shouting and gesticulating in true Persian style. I, snugly ensconced in the *khawa-khana,* took no part in the war. The storm was self-evident, the night was not too far off. On the other hand, Daniel presumably knew his own business, and in any case, completely ignorant of local conditions, distances, and the like, I was in no position to give an opinion.

The words of Daniel finally prevailed, and we took the road again. Once free of the shelter of the village, we met the abandoned fury of the blizzard, and were enveloped in a white, dense veil, as it were, which effectually limited our vision to a circle of some fifty yards. The cold was intense, and in spite of high fur-lined boots, fur-lined overcoat, two waistcoats, a thick tweed suit, as well as many rugs and wraps, I was soon uncomfortably near freezing-point. All signs of a track had by now been obliterated, and we had only the telegraph line to guide us. This latter, it was true, showed the general direction to Kuchan, but by no means necessarily followed the road faithfully the whole way. Hither and thither we turned, seeking the track, sometimes on firm ground, sometimes engulfed axle-high in a drift. Daniel shouted encouragements, the horses plunged and strained, the wind moaned, the snow swirled. Every minute brought us nearer to darkness ; every minute the snow seemed deeper, more impenetrable. The unpleasant prospect of a night in the blizzard loomed large.

Then from somewhere beyond the white veil which

hemmed us in came the cries of human voices. We were not the only travellers in difficulties, it would appear, and presently we came upon another carriage in the same plight as ourselves. Company in misfortune—even if it be company which can afford no relief—is always cheering, and I think we were mutually glad to see each other. The drivers exchanged salutations, the horses whinnied, only the passengers remained unseen in the recesses of their vehicles, and who the other snow-bound traveller was I do not know to this day.

In the meantime the encounter was decidedly to their advantage, as our animals were the fresher, and so led the procession to break the trail. On we went as before, only even slower, as the horses wearied. Often we made prolonged halts to rest them, and to enable Daniel—standing up on the box—to scan the surrounding haze, which was gradually turning to a darker tinge. The day had passed ; night was upon us.

But at the same time the blizzard capriciously cleared, and scrambling over the top of a little rise we saw beneath us a black irregular mass, with twinkling lights here and there. It was Kuchan, and presently we were driving through its streets.

Daniel—as I impressed on him later in Askabad, to the accompaniment of a reduced tip—did not care as well for his passengers as he did for himself or his horses. His one idea on reaching a *manzil* was to have his horses well stabled—a very laudable idea too in itself—and himself comfortably housed. As for me, I could shift for myself, for all Mr. D. troubled. Here for instance in Kuchan, though better places must have been known to him, he dumped me down in a

caravanserai which had only one room left unoccupied. After I had seen the room I understood also why it was vacant. It was not merely dirty, but filthy, half in ruins, and with a crazy door which might obstruct the light but certainly not the winter winds.

A certain amount of wayfaring in the East has not left me squeamish when it comes to rough quarters, and I might have made a shift to occupy a corner of the pigsty if it had only been for the one night. But Daniel, before betaking himself off, had muttered something about a stay in town until the weather bettered, and an indefinite sojourn in that 'black hole' was more than I could face.

I was standing thus in a gloomy quandary when suddenly a fairy godmother, in the shape of a little old Russian woman, appeared. In Kuchan, as in Meshed, besides Russian troops there is a small Russian colony. She knew a little Persian, on which she fell back when she found that I knew no Russian, and with this—eked out by signs—she gave me to understand that she knew of a *mehman-khana* (hotel), whither she would take me.

'Lead, and I follow,' said I joyfully, or words to that effect, and after a five minutes' tramp we reached the *mehman-khana*. It was not exactly what would be called an hotel in England, or even in India. However, they could give me a room, with a bed, a carpet, and a stove in it, which, after the black hole of the serai, seemed an apartment fit for a king. As for the little old woman, while I was talking to the proprietor of the *mehman-khana* she disappeared as suddenly as she had come. I never saw her afterwards

about the hotel premises, so presumably she was unconnected with its management, and must have done what she did from simple pity for a forlorn traveller. Bless her! May she prosper in Kuchan and live to return to her own country!

But with all this, where was the diligence? Where indeed? It had not entered the town with us, and had been last seen at the village of the mid-day halt. About two hours after arrival, having thawed and eaten, I waded—the snow was almost knee-deep in the streets—up to the serai. There I found Daniel at dinner with some Russian friends, in snug quarters which were very different from the rest of the building. No! The diligence had not yet arrived. Perhaps they had gone back to the village, finding the road too bad. We could do nothing now but wait till the morning. This was true enough, so I went back to the *mehman-khana*, saw to it that there was a good fire in the stove, and went to bed just as I was, except for boots, all my impedimenta being with the diligence.

The diligence arrived the next day at about 11 A.M., just when I was becoming somewhat anxious as to its fate and Daniel was organising a search party to go and look for it. My servant was very sorry for himself, and spun me a long tale of woe. It appeared that with great difficulty they had followed us a short way, and then, seeing the hopelessness of the attempt, had turned back, and after many hours' struggling had reached the village from which they started long after nightfall. This morning they had again set out at dawn, and by dint of incredible exertions and extra horses borrowed for the occasion had just managed



PERSIAN GUARDS

to make the passage. He, my servant, had nearly died from cold. Sitting on the top of my luggage in the diligence was certainly an exposed position.

All that night it snowed, and on the morrow, sure enough, though the gale had ceased, there was trouble about setting sail, for on going to the caravanserai early I found Daniel and his satellite engaged in a fierce argument—to start or not to start being the subject of the debate. The satellite, as skipper of the slower craft, pointed out—justly enough—that, though the phaeton might win through, the diligence might very well not, and he'd be d—d if he'd spend another night wandering about in the snow. One experience of that sort was quite enough! At least that appeared to be the gist of his remarks when considerably compressed and put into very bad Persian for my benefit by Daniel, the original being in Russian. My servant, as a diligence passenger, supported the satellite. Daniel himself, being paid by me for the trip, and not by the day, was naturally anxious to get it over as soon as possible. Thus they strove, and the caravanserai was filled with their clamour.

I, as on the former occasion, remained neutral, and for precisely the same reasons. So, telling them to let me know when the decision of the court should have been arrived at, I plodded my way back to the *mehman-khana* and my warm stove. Presently my servant appeared and gloomily announced that the vehicles were at the door ready to load up and start. He added that Daniel had carried the day by treating the satellite to unlimited vodka, and that the latter was now ready to go anywhere and do anything.

At length we were off, and this time carrying an extra passenger. The owner of the *mehman-khana*, a Russian, had a friend, also a Russian, returning to his native city of Tiflis; would I be so very kind as to let him have a seat on my diligence as far as Askabad? The friend appeared a pleasant-looking individual, the management had been civil and obliging, and one more would make no difference to the diligence, in fact might be useful if it came to digging it out of a snowdrift. So I assented, and the man from Tiflis—as I dubbed him—became one of our party; and if in truth he owed any return for the lift, he more than repaid it by the amusement he afforded me.

For this cross-country journey, which had appeared to me to call for the roughest of homely attire, he had arrayed himself in a decidedly smart blue suit, while over his boots were a pair of highly polished goloshes, putting to shame my ancient 'rubbers.' On his head was perched a stylish green Homburg, with the bow fashionably set behind—the effect of this headgear, however, being somewhat spoilt by a woollen muffler which passed round his chin and over the top of the hat. From out of the muffler looked forth a mild, middle-aged face. His baggage consisted of a single bundle, carried in his hand. Thus he proposed to live, move, and have his being until he reached the far-distant city of Tiflis. Whenever my eye caught his, something comical in his appearance irrepressibly tickled my fancy, and I would smile, while he in his turn—scenting some unknown jest—would grin amicably back.

If the snow lay deep in the town, it was still deeper outside, and when I saw the unbroken white expanse

stretching away on every side, and when we resumed our old tactics of plunging hither and thither seeking for the track, our chance of making the next *manzil* seemed to be so hopeless that I was within an ace of suggesting to Daniel the advisability of our turning back while we could. However, Daniel had set out on his own responsibility, and on his own responsibility he could continue—so I decided—if he thought fit. He continued to think fit, and notwithstanding protests from the unhappy satellite, in whom doubtless the vodka was now growing cold, held doggedly on. And the event proved that he was right. After some two hours' heavy going, the track showed up faintly in places through the snow, and we could proceed—also in places—at a slow trot. Thus, walking and trotting, we reached the *manzil* shortly before sunset.

We were now four days out from Meshed, and under ordinary circumstances should have been sleeping at Askabad. As it was, with the mountains still to cross, Askabad was goodness only knew how many days distant. Next day we were early on the road, but there were others before us. The fine weather—the day was bright, with a clear sky—had set free the stream of traffic dammed by the previous snowy days, and all the Life of the Road was in motion. Long lines of camels, droves of mules and donkeys, fourgons and diligences, impeded our progress, until at length we reached a spot where was a block which would not have disgraced Piccadilly. The track here wound in sharp S turns down a steep hillside, and was scarcely wide enough to allow two laden camels to pass abreast. There must have been some five hundred animals, with perhaps a hundred carts, arrived from opposite

directions, all jammed together and disputing the right of way. And far out on the plains were other black specks, representing other caravans, coming up to add to the hurly-burly.

We were at the tail of one end of the block, and, any immediate advance being impossible, Rags and I alighted and descended the hill on foot. It was an amusing medley that we passed, and well worth the walk. Here were two opposing camel caravans pushing and shoving, the while their masters bickered fiercely, burning each other's fathers with the greatest energy.[1] Here a weaker camel had gone to the wall, or rather over the edge of the road, and lay helpless in the snow until he should be dug out. There was a line of mules. There again was an overturned fourgon, its bales strewn broadcast.

One little wayside comedy I noticed which especially took my attention.

At a turn in the road the drivers of some blocked fourgons—rough, somewhat scoundrelly looking Turkomans—were collected in a group, chatting, and now and then indulging in rough horse-play among themselves. Presently passed a line of camels, and on the rearmost a bucket loosely tied. The eyes of the nearest Turkoman lit up. In a twinkling he had untied the bucket and thrown it across to a companion, who as quickly concealed it in the nearest fourgon. Scarcely had this been effected when back came the camel-man, searching for his bucket, and who so innocent as those rascally drivers ?

[1] In Persia you do not consign a man to Hades, but politely insinuate that his father is already grilling there, " son of a burnt father " being the correct expression to use.

They had a bucket, it is true, but it was their own and they showed it to him. He however knew very well who the pilferers were, and began shrill expostulations, whereupon the burliest of the knaves seized him round the waist, and put him on his back in the snow. He rose slowly and moved off, followed by the ribald jeers of the Turkomans. Doubtless he did wisely—the next time the grip of the Turkoman around his ribs might not have been so light.

In India, where the word of a sahib goes for a good deal, I would have interfered on his behalf, but in Persia—which is emphatically not India—one must choose one's times and seasons for putting one's fingers into other people's pies ; and the present I did not judge an expedient one so to do.

And in any case the camel-man ought to have known that on a Persian road there is only one law of life :

> The good old rule, the ancient plan,
> That he shall hold who has the power,
> And he shall take who can.

And knowing this ought to have taken greater care of his property.

On going back to my carriages I found a state of affairs which speedily drove all thoughts of other people's misfortunes out of my head.

Daniel, impatient of delay, had endeavoured to cut off the bend of an S turn by dropping straight down the side of the hill from road to road. If successful, this enterprising manœuvre would undoubtedly have gained us much time by putting us in front of a large portion of the 'block.' Unfortunately the

plan did not succeed, and left both vehicles stuck firmly in a drift about one hundred yards short of the lower track, from which Daniel and Co. were now busily engaged in trying to extricate them.

But it was no easy task. The snow was deep, topping the carriage wheels, and deeper still in front, and for a long time all efforts failed, notwithstanding that they were concentrated on one vehicle at a time —the phaeton first, two of the diligence's horses being harnessed to it as well as its own. But with all this extra aid, the poor beasts could only strain vainly, time after time, under the scourge of Daniel's whip.

In this affair the man from Tiflis did yeoman service. His duty it was to scout ahead and pick out the best trail. This he did valiantly, Homburg hat, polished goloshes and all. Once he disappeared up to his shoulders, and only extricated himself with considerable difficulty. After this he came up to me to take breath, smiling sadly, as much as to say this was a bad business, and exhibiting a right foot from which the golosh was missing. Then he once more plunged into the fray.

As for me, I considered there were quite enough cooks at the broth without my interference ; so, having waded to the phaeton and taken out a rug and the luncheon basket, and waded back again to firm ground, I sat in the sun with Rags, ate, smoked, and thanked my stars that it was a fine day and not blowing a blizzard.

The block slowly dissolved ; camels, mules, and fourgons went their respective ways ; and at length we were left alone on the hillside.

More time passed away, and still our carriages

remained embedded to all appearances as firm as the rock of Gibraltar. At length I could see that a last forlorn hope was being organised. All seven horses of the two carriages, by a cunning arrangement of straps and traces which took nearly half an hour to arrange, were harnessed to the phaeton, the satellite and my servant put their shoulders to its rear, and at a crack from Daniel's whip men and horses made a great final effort. The phaeton moved reluctantly, then stopped; but as the whip fell mercilessly and as the maddened team plunged desperately forward, it moved again—though with a tantalising slowness. A leader slipped and fell, but recovered his footing miraculously without checking his trace-mates. Then the drift was through, and the wheels of the phaeton were spinning fast, and under them the snow was spurting up like spray, and the men were shouting, and the horses cantering, and the man from Tiflis was running in front like Elijah before the chariot, and the road was reached.

But the diligence still remained unretrieved—a heavier vehicle too, though it would have the advantage of the phaeton's broken trail. So when the sweating, quivering horses had been given a rest—and they needed it, poor beasts—all seven were again harnessed, and once more the men shouted and shoved, and the horses strained and stumbled, and the man from Tiflis ran ahead, and for a second time success was achieved. But at the cost of many valuable hours. We had arrived at the block at nine. As we drove off I looked at my watch. It was now half-past one. That day, as may be expected, our stage was not a long one.

The next we were to cross the Russian frontier, and

as a preliminary to pass the Persian Customs. But this latter did not prove formidable. A little politeness, a lifted hat, a shake of the hand, goes very far with the courteous Persian. If to politeness a *peshkush* (present) be added every now and then, the traveller's path will as a rule be smooth enough.

Twenty minutes later we reached a little post perched on the top of a hill. Some Russian soldiers lounged round the door. A Russian sentry paced to and fro with fixed bayonet. The phaeton stopped. An officer came forward, examined my passport, and returned it with a polite bow. We drove on again, and I was in Russia.

The Russian Customs, situated about a mile on the other side of the frontier, were not so amenable as the Persian. Every box was opened, one or two were probed to the bottom. At length, however, all official righteousness being fulfilled, we were permitted to depart, and making a forced march—or rather drive—reached Askabad at about ten o'clock that night.

CHAPTER XII

ASKABAD TO TEHERAN VIA THE CASPIAN SEA

AT Askabad I went, of course, like all travellers—who know not Russian—to Madame R——'s hotel. I say of course, because if he knows not Russian the foreign traveller is as much at a loss in Askabad as though he were cast away among the natives of Patagonia.

There is a very prevalent idea that the Russian is a great linguist, that every educated Russian, for example, knows French. But this, as a matter of cold fact, is a fallacy. The cosmopolitan Russian, who is as much at home in Monte Carlo or London as in Petrograd, *does* speak with tongues. High officials, whether military or civil, as a matter of course know French and German. So do business men whose work compels a knowledge of these languages. But the lower official, and the civilian of the same standing, probably speak only their mother-tongue.

This being so, Madame R——, who is French, was to me in truth a friend in need. Seven years here and there in the East—though it had given me a little knowledge of Eastern tongues—had rusted my French considerably ; still enough remained, however, to explain myself for the common needs and necessaries of life. But not only did Madame R—— act as

interpreter, but also took me out shopping, showed me the sights, and finally saw me off at the station—of which more anon.

But of sights, indeed, Askabad—except for the temple of the Babis—is void.

A very fair comparison for it—as indeed for most features of Russian Central Asia—is to turn to its equivalent in India, where the same conditions—a European Power ruling over a large Eastern empire—to a great extent exist. And in this comparison Askabad—like nearly all the other towns of Russian Turkistan—resembles an Indian cantonment—Lahore, for example, with its military quarter and its native city each separate from the other. The cantonment is laid out in broad streets, flanked for the most part by one-storied bungalows—like its Indian prototype—and containing several good shops. As befitting its position of administrative centre to the province of Transcaspia it covers a large extent of ground. The military element pervades it; the whole of Russian Central Asia is more or less under military government, and nine out of ten of the men met with seem to be in uniform.

The Babist temple is on the outskirts of the cantonment, and to me, who am blissfully ignorant of the ethics of architecture, it seemed a singularly beautiful place of worship. It was not quite finished, but enough was completed to show that it must have cost an immense amount of money; so immense that it gives one quite a new idea of the numbers and wealth of the sect which can subscribe such funds. At the same time Askabad, being tucked away in a corner of Asia, so to speak, and hardly on the high road to anywhere in

particular, does not seem a very suitable spot for the Mecca of the Babi sect, which in truth it is meant to be. Persia itself—where the Babis have endured, and endured heroically too, the most terrible persecutions—is out of the question. But if they wished for a place as near as possible to the country from which their religion sprang, some such headquarters as Baku, on the main route from Europe to Teheran, would have seemed more central.

The most interesting side to the native city—which contains nothing at all remarkable in the way of buildings, secular or religious—is that which usually attracts the traveller's notice in most Oriental cities, the crowd. For here one can see all the Central Asian types, besides stray individuals from the neighbouring countries of Persia, Afghanistan, and China.

I had arrived at Askabad on a Thursday, and proposed leaving by the Krasnavodsk express at 10.30 on Friday night. The first thing to be done preparatory to starting was to retrieve my passport from the police, to whom it had been entrusted by Madame R——; every hotel-keeper in Russia, on the arrival of a traveller, being bound to send his passport immediately to the local police office. There it is kept until its owner intimates that he is leaving for elsewhere—destination to be strictly specified; and as no one can travel in Russia without a passport, the traveller's movements are thus carefully watched, and even regulated at times. In addition to the ordinary passport special permission is required before a foreigner can use the Transcaspian Railway. However, as I had already procured this before leaving Meshed, when in due course my passport came back to me, I was free to depart.

Madame R—— and I drove down to the station, not in one, but in three *droschkis*—that is to say, Madame R——, Rags, and myself occupied one, and my servant and my luggage the remaining two. The *droschkis* are ridiculously small phaetons utterly unsuitable for luggage, but as there are no other species of vehicles available one is forced to employ them in large numbers, to the great benefit of their drivers.

Askabad may resemble an Indian cantonment, but its railway station is very different from that of the latter. You, if you have travelled in India, know what a night departure from one is like. As your vehicle stops before the station a horde of vociferating coolies precipitate themselves upon your goods and chattels, and bear them away. Following them you find yourself upon the platform, where recumbent, sleeping figures are extended, waiting for the train to arrive. Itinerant vendors of sweetmeats, of chupatties and curries, and of other native delicacies, hawk their wares up and down with raucous voices. A few Europeans—all in 'mufti'—are scattered here and there, surrounded by piles of luggage. Presently the train comes in, the recumbent figures arise and—making common cause with the hawkers in rendering the night hideous with screams and cries—scuffle for places in the crowded carriages, and pandemonium reigns supreme. Yet it is an orderly pandemonium. The few policemen moving unobtrusively up and down handle the crowd admirably. There are no fights, no 'regrettable incidents,' and before the last whistle of the guard shrills everyone has found a place, and the engine puffs away again into the night. You realise that you are travelling under a Government which, for good or ill,

interferes as little as possible with the life of those under its charge.

Some such scene as this I had expected at Askabad. But the reality was far different.

To begin with, instead of the vociferating coolies, three quiet uniformed Russian porters took firm possession of my baggage and bore it away, while Madame R—— and I proceeded to the waiting-room. This was also the salle-à-manger, and a bookstall occupied one corner. The room was filled by a crowd of travellers, or friends seeing them off. The men seemed to be officers, and all wore uniform, the ladies furs.

No railway waiting-room is a place of joy and abandon, but the atmosphere of this particular waiting-room seemed to be more than ordinarily frosty. A friend with some experience of Russia once said to me, àpropos of the subdued air which—he said—hung over Russian society, that 'they always seemed to be waiting for something to happen.' From my own small personal experience I am unable to say whether this is a correct description or not, but the phrase has stuck in my memory, and it certainly seemed to fit the present company. Though what they were in expectation for was not apparent, unless indeed it was the express which presently steamed in, when we all streamed out on to the platform.

Among the minor interests of travel is the coming to cross-roads, whose finger-posts have alluring destinations inscribed upon them. Your own road goes straight on, but that does not prevent you from following the others in imagination. Here, for instance, was a commonplace twentieth-century machine straight

from such epitomes of romance as Bokhara and Samarkand. Now my path—and my passport—pointed westwards, but perhaps some day I might return, my face turned eastwards, and visit these ancient cities. . . .

'If you wish to see the people of India,' says a very famous writer, 'go to the railway stations,' and by the same analogy I had expected to see the people of Transcaspia on the platform of Askabad. But whether the Central Asian does not travel by express, or whether he has not the same love of movement as the Indian, I do not know. This I do know, that there were no third-class passengers to be seen on the platform, and only official Russia—and his wife—were to be seen bustling to and fro beneath the electric lights.

At the last moment I went near to missing the train. For Rags—acting on Madame R——'s advice—I had taken no ticket. Dogs in Russia travel as baggage, and if I purchased a ticket, so said Madame R——, they would put Rags in the luggage-van—the Muscovite knows not dog-boxes—where doubtless he would be supremely uncomfortable. On the other hand, I could smuggle him into the carriage with me, and if the inspector were to say anything— '*Une rouble, vous savez.*' . . . To me this seemed a reckless proceeding, and I had visions of Rags and his master being led away to Siberia in chains. However, I gave way to Madame R——'s superior experience, and endeavoured to hide away Rags unostentatiously behind my valise. Unfortunately there was no evading the eagle eye of the inspector, and so magnificent a creature, in gorgeous uniform, with flowing moustaches and whiskers, was he, that I quailed at approaching him with bribery and corruption. So there was nothing for it but to get out on to

the platform again and procure the necessary ticket, though the first bell—on the third the train departs—had already sounded. Assisted by Madame R—— I made the necessary purchase, and got back to my carriage just in time. The autocrat of the hirsute appendages was placated by this display of zeal to the extent of allowing Rags to remain in the carriage, so all was well. Half a minute later the third bell rang out and the train started.

I travelled second-class. In Russia one always does apparently, unless one happens to be a person of exalted rank, and I found my carriage a very comfortable one—much more so than the similar article supplied on the Indian railways. It was a *coupé*, which I had to myself as the train was empty, so my *place-carte*—entitling me to full and undivided possession of my berth—was an unnecessary expense. But though comfortable, it was most oppressively hot and stuffy, rendered so by a complicated system of boiling hot-water pipes. The Englishman keeps warm by taking exercise, the Chinaman by putting on more clothes, as the old saying runs, and the Russian one might add, both by means of extra apparel and by Turkish bath atmospheres. On the inner of the two windows—double windows are common throughout all Russia to keep out the intense cold—was the usual sash. I pulled at this without avail until the perspiration stood out on my forehead, when a grunt behind caused me to look round. A train official, not he of the whiskers, was eyeing me askance and shaking his head. Still grunting and shaking his head he stalked away. Evidently, I thought, I had broken one of the many million of Russian bye-laws, the more so as in about

five minutes the first official came back with a second. I was in the process of wondering what the penalty might be for 'a desperate attempt at window-opening,' when the second official produced a long stick and unscrewed a ventilator at the top of the carriage. It was seemingly too great a responsibility for the passenger to be able to open a ventilator himself. Afterwards I examined the window. It was hermetically sealed, and no amount of pulling on the false sash could have opened it. There were no risks of fresh-air on the Krasnavodsk express!

But even with the ventilator open it was still very oppressive, and I lay in my berth and 'sweated'—there is no other word for it—much as I have sweated in the Punjab at the beginning of the hot weather. And the season of my journey, you must remember, was winter, with fresh snow lying in the streets of Askabad.

Later—having shown my passport and ticket—I was left to slumber in peace.

Next morning we were far out on the desert which separates the Turkoman country—of which Askabad is roughly the western limit—from the Caspian Sea, and the desolate landscape stretched away unbroken on either hand, terminating on the south in some far-off mountains.

But though the line traversed so featureless a country, from a historical point of view it was interesting enough, for in its day it had made history—grim and bloody history too at that. Just as Lord Kitchener used a railway to subdue the Sudan, so Skobeleff—many years previously—had built the Transcaspian line to do likewise by the Turkoman. Doubtless the

former plan of campaign was inspired by a knowledge of the latter. The Turkomans—as everybody knows—were finally crushed in the action of Geok Teppe. Geok Teppe is now a little wayside station on the railway, and as a soldier myself I should have liked to catch a glimpse of the scene of a great commander's exploit. Unfortunately we passed it in the night, so this was impossible.

There was an excellent buffet on the train, with a menu the length of my arm to choose from, but written all in Russian. However, drawing a bow at a venture, and pointing to two items at hazard, I made a *déjeuner* of some soup and a roast of sorts, washed down by a bottle of light beer, a repast which was as superior to the chicken-fried, chicken-curry, chicken-this, and chicken-that fare on the ordinary Indian dining-car as the smooth running of the Russian express was to the rackety progress of the Indian train.

To put the matter shortly, there is not a line in India which, in all-round comfort for the traveller, can—save for a little over-heating—compare with the Transcaspian Railway. This may be sad, but it is certainly true.

We arrived at Krasnavodsk at 3 P.M., and two hours later—with my passport again examined, and with my baggage and Rags safely stowed away in my cabin—I stood on the deck of the Baku-bound boat as she threshed her way out to the open sea, with the threat of a stormy night lowering in the heavens.

I am not an enthusiastic sailor, for one reason, that when the sea gets up, I am forced—on account of urgent private affairs—to go below. Therefore I prefer my travels to be upon dry land. But at the same time

the sea is so engraved upon the very souls of us—the English—that there are probably few Englishmen who can meet her after long separation without some sort of emotion. And more, to the exile in the East, the sea means the return from his exile.

> Could the winds blow me back
> Or the waves hurl me home?

Not those of the Caspian at any rate, but nevertheless it did not need much imagination to change that overgrown lake into the wide waters of the Indian Ocean, or that little paddle-steamer into a lordly twin-screw P. and O., or the twinkling pin-points of Krasnavodsk—now coming out from the gathering dusk—to what some cynic has said to be the best sight in Asia, 'the Bombay lights astern.' . . .

A flat sea over-hung by slight haze, a line of shipping with the white smoke from the funnels ascending steadily in the still air; behind, a town climbing to low snow-streaked hills—Baku; and the time—early on the following day.

Here also I found a sign-post for a journey in imagination; to wit, the oil-boats lined along the jetties waiting for the Volga ice to loosen that they might begin their long up-river trip. . . .

André met me on the pier. André belongs to the Hotel d'E——, and is to Baku what Madame R—— is to Askabad, for in Baku likewise few know any other tongue but Russian, and the stranger finds himself at a loss. Like Madame R——, André is obliging. Not only does he pass your baggage through the Customs and take your passport to the police, but he will also show you your shops, and your bank for the cashing of

your letter of credit. Under his auspices—for I was now approaching the capital of Persia, and my clothes bore the travel-stains of an overland journey of something under fifteen hundred miles—I purchased various articles of apparel, among others a hat—a Homburg of a delicate shade in green—and an overcoat. The shopman produced two of the latter, of which my choice—if not my taste—inclined towards the cheaper. 'But, Monsieur,' expostulated André, 'the other suits your hat so much better!' I felt I was in the presence of an artist, of one who had inherited the spirit if not the body—for André is short and fat—of the late lamented Beau Brummell, and submitted to the dictum—at the expense of my pocket.

Baku—like many towns in Asiatic Russia—is subject to periodical outbursts of anarchy. Its population is largely made up of Tartars and Armenians, which combination is about as conducive to peace and quiet as that of cat and dog. Some years ago a general feeling of unrest all through the Caucasus, the Persian revolution, disturbances throughout Russia-in-Europe, and various other causes, led to a particularly bad outbreak of lawlessness in Baku, which began by a general massacre of the Armenians by the Tartars. The former, however, were by no means prepared to submit tamely to such treatment, and some months later—having successfully 'run' through numerous consignments of arms—turned on their oppressors and took their revenge.

The state of the town while these operations were in progress, and afterwards while the embers of anarchy were still glowing, may be gathered from the following incidents.

A friend of mine in Baku happened to be taking a morning promenade, when two carriages passed—one carrying Armenians, the other Tartars. Without a word exchanged the occupants pulled out their pistols, and opened fire on each other, pop—pop—pop, all the way down the street. Two policemen standing at the corner, with military precision knelt down, faced outwards, and opened fire—in their turn—one on the Armenians, the other on the Tartars. The passers-by took cover in adjacent doorways during the fusillade, in which, strange to say, none of them were hit, the innocent bystander—as a rule—suffering more in affairs of this sort than the combatants themselves. Then the carriages passed out of sight, the policemen resumed their beat, the passers-by came out of their shelters, the traffic went its way. No further notice was taken of the matter. In the eyes of Baku it was quite an everyday occurrence.

Incident No. 2. Another friend of mine—a lady, as it happens—was staying at the Hotel d'E—— while passing through on her way to England. In the night she was awakened by some shots, which sounded as if they had been fired outside her door. Concluding that this was impossible, and that the firing had in reality occurred in the street outside, and being a traveller of some little experience and the possessor of strong nerves, she turned over and went to sleep again. Next morning, however, revealed the fact that the shots *had* been discharged outside her door. During the night some desperadoes had entered the hotel, had shot dead the *concierge* who attempted to withstand them, and then decamped.

Remembering these and other events of a like

nature, I expected to see some exciting scenes in Baku—from a safe distance, *bien entendu*. However, my visit found the city on its best behaviour. A state of law and order prevailed, and had prevailed for some time, which would not have disgraced London. Signs, however, there still were that the good old times might some day return. The policemen in the streets had Mauser pistols strapped round their waists; in the Russian-Asiatic bank two policemen were seated near the cashier's desk, with loaded weapons across their knees; and in the entrance of the same building a notice was still prominent, that clients entering the bank armed were liable to be shot on sight!

I arrived in Baku on Sunday morning. The Baku-Enzeli boat did not leave until Tuesday evening. I thus had some time on my hands, part of which I used in looking round for a fellow-traveller, or fellow-travellers, who might share the expenses of the Resht-Teheran trip, which are by no means light. The means of progression is by carriage, which costs you about £12. Then for your luggage—if you have any appreciable amount—you must have another carriage or wagon, which costs £10. Total, £22 for a journey of forty-eight hours.

I was very fortunate in finding in the hotel a Swedish officer, Captain P——, proceeding to Teheran to join the Swedish Gendarmerie, and we accordingly agreed to travel together. A third offered himself in the person of Monsieur F——, a Frenchman who was proceeding towards Teheran to open an hotel. F—— informed us that he was held up at Baku waiting for money. Perhaps P—— and myself might consider the plan of paying half expenses each from Resht onwards, and

allowing him (F——) a seat in our carriage. On arrival at Teheran, where he had funds, he would pay his share of a third seat.

In money matters one has to be cautious with casual hotel acquaintances. The confidence trick has many and specious disguises. But in any case P—— and myself would have to pay half shares, and, should Monsieur default, would only be ' done ' to the extent of giving him a free passage. These considerations, and a prejudice in favour of F——'s personal appearance—which after all is the best letter of credit a man can carry—clinched the bargain. So the three of us, a Swedish officer, a British traveller, and a French *maître-d'hôtel,* set out for Teheran. It was a queer combination, but it is in the rubbing shoulders with all sorts and conditions of one's fellow-men that half the fascination of travel lies.

I need hardly add that Monsieur F—— was true to his word,and that on arrival at Teheran he paid us his share to the uttermost farthing. In addition, his knowledge of French, Persian, and English, his experience of the route—which he had traversed two or three times before—his cheerfulness in face of the various vexatious delays inseparable from any sort of travel in Persia, proved of great use to our party and made him an excellent travelling companion. And when you have said this about a fellow-mortal you have little to add except the hope that he reciprocates your opinion.

The run from Baku to Enzeli is about eighteen hours, and the sea was calm, which enabled me to do justice to the excellent dinner on the boat. First the *sakoska,* which the Russians take by way of an appetiser,

but which is in reality a square meal in itself, consisting of smoked salmon, sardines, caviare, sausages, cheeses, &c., and of course the (then) inevitable vodka. Afterwards came the dinner proper, well cooked, and of five courses. And all this, mark you, on a small coasting steamer, which in English waters would have provided for her passengers boiled mutton and suet dumpling—take it, or leave it.

On arrival at Enzeli at one o'clock in the day, we passed *instanter* from the well-ordered ways of the West to the disordered pandemonium of the East. Here, however, P—— proved a trump card, as, being in the service of the Persian Government, he held an Open Sesame in the shape of an official mandate which required all whom it might concern to help him on his way. And we, being of his entourage, benefitted likewise. So we passed the Customs successfully and quickly, and, having done so, were confronted with another difficulty.

Enzeli lies some twenty miles from Resht, and since the latter is on the high road to the capital, it might be thought that there would be some adequate means of conveying thither the heavy baggage of the numerous passengers arriving from Europe. But 'Nous sommes en Perse,' as F—— would satirically remark at every check, and the only transport available were the same small phaetons which I had already experienced at Askabad. And even the number of these was so limited as not to suffice for the needs of all the passengers arriving by the steamer.

What were we to do? Finally F—— suggested that he and my servant would take the baggage up the river in a hired boat propelled by a couple of rowers,

while P—— and I would drive. The river is navigable by small boats to within three miles of Resht, whence doubtless he could get some sort of conveyance for transference to the city. We would foregather that evening at the carriage office.

But when, some four hours later, P—— and I reached the carriage office there was no news of F——. Further, we were informed that owing to a shortage of horses on the road we should not be able to start until the day after the morrow—if then ; but in view of P——'s Open Sesame we should, at any rate, be the first travellers to get carriages for Teheran. So, having left a note for F——, we betook ourselves to one of the apologies for hotels which exist in Resht, paddling our way on foot through slush and snow, as owing to a heavy fall of the latter the streets were quite impassable for wheeled traffic.

Next morning, early, we again called at the carriage office. No news of F——. We went to the bank, cashed cheques and letters of credit, returned. Still no news of our *maître d'hôtel.* Eleven o'clock came. Twelve o'clock. And we were debating the advisability of informing the police—fearing that F—— must have come to some harm—when he appeared in person with quite a small Odyssey to relate. The stream—swollen by melting snow—had been so rapid that their progress had been extraordinarily slow and difficult. Twice they had had to completely unload in order to get the boat past difficult corners, and finally had not reached their destination until nine o'clock—long after dark. F—— passed the night in a native coffee-house, and next morning had set about getting the baggage into Resht. But there were no vehicles to be

had near the town itself, and when a wagon was finally procured the road was in such an atrocious state from mud and snow that it was only with great efforts that the carriage office was made.

However, here he was, safe and sound, still cheerful, and with all our baggage ; and with his assistance we managed to prevail on the *mirza* (clerk) of the carriage office to promise us two vehicles next morning at seven o'clock.

F—— predicted that nine would probably approach nearer to Persian ideas of punctuality, and I, with four months of Persian travel behind me, was inclined to agree ; but since it was important for us to start as early as possible, eventually we found ourselves at the office at 6.30 A.M., after a long, dark, and wet tramp from our hotel. Seven o'clock came—no sign of life at the office. Carriages stood about in the courtyard, but there were no horses to be seen. Eight o'clock, and half-past eight, and nine passed before his majesty the *mirza* deigned to put in an appearance. Then there was our baggage to be weighed, payments to be made, horses to be put to, and finally we did not start until nearly ten. The last straw came when his majesty approached and asked for a *tip* ! This after having kept us waiting, kicking our heels in the cold, for three hours ! However, it gave us the opportunity for a counter-attack, and putting our heads out of the window—we were by this time securely *en voiture*—we had the satisfaction of consigning his majesty to the devil—F—— and myself in Persian, P—— in Swedish and German. Of course, in any other country we should have followed this up with a report to the carriage company, but in Persia such reports are merely

so much waste of time, so one has to shrug one's shoulders and thank one's stars that one starts at all.

From Resht to Teheran takes forty-eight hours, as I have said above—that is to say, theoretically. Practically it often takes longer, according to the condition of the road and the number of horses available. These latter are laid out in stages at a distance of every ten miles or so, and you drive day and night.

To be boxed up in a carriage for two days and two nights—in our case it resolved itself into three days and two nights, owing to various delays—save for halts of a few hours every now and again for rest and refreshment at a stage, is not a pleasant way of wayfaring, But at any rate the route is safe for travellers—though the mail-carts are robbed sometimes; it is quick—for Persia; and the road—being originally constructed, and now kept up, under Russian supervision—is good. The halting-places are also much superior to the caravanserais one has to put up with on other roads in Persia.

Soon after leaving Resht the road runs over the Elburz mountains, and there are some fine bits of scenery along it. Unfortunately, we traversed this section during the first night, and the next morning were descending the lower slopes of the southern side, which do not contain anything special to strike the eye.

At Kazvin, which lies a little more than half-way to Teheran, we met a comrade of P——'s, a Swedish officer of the gendarmerie who had charge of the Kazvin-Hamadan road. He talked English fluently, and we had a long conversation together. The work of

the gendarmerie is not unlike that of our own militias on the north-west frontier of India,and from the general trend of our talk I might almost have been sitting in the Peshawar Club, say, with an officer of the Khyber Rifles. Thus :

'Yes, I have charge of the road from here to Hamadan. Disturbed ? Oh, no ! Not as much as down in the south, Shiraz to Bushire. That is very bad. Those Kashgais and Kuguloos. . . . But we have our brigands up here too, though not so many as there were.' (Smiles.) 'We have shot a few. Oh, yes ! any brigand taken with arms in his hands we shoot.' (Shrugs his shoulders.) 'What can you do ? It's the only way to deal with them. Just now I have received a telephone message—yes, we have telephones all along the road—from one of my under-officers—what you would perhaps call sergeant in your army—a Persian, saying that he has taken two brigands prisoners—what is he to do with them ? I tell him he must not ask questions like that. He knows our rule. They were taken in arms. . . . A cigarette ? Thank you very much. These Persian cigarettes, when one gets used to them, are not at all bad. All our officers smoke them . . . . What were we talking about ? Oh, yes. Shooting brigands. We have now made—how do you say in English ?—a good expression ? *Im*pression ? Yes, yes ; impression, of course. We have made a good impression, and need not be so strict. But the shooting is not all on our part, you understand. When we have a skirmish the brigands of course shoot back. I had my horse shot under me once, and was wounded myself. Serious ? Oh, no. How do you call it ?—flesh wound. Nothing at all. . . . There is one brigand

who is a great enemy of mine ; his name is Mohammed Hassan, and he has got a band of about twenty men under him. I have tried many times to catch him, but he always gets away. However, I am starting with fifty men to-morrow morning to hunt him once more. . . . Do I like life in the gendarmerie ? Yes ; on the whole. You see it is more exciting than sitting in garrison in Sweden. Then one gets more pay, and one sees the world a little. And of course one has more responsibility. I am quite independent to manage my own affairs. I have my spies out through the villages, who give me information about the brigands. Then I get my little force together and we go out—make a long night march perhaps—and attack a village where the brigands may be. Sometimes they are not there, so I have all my trouble for nothing. Sometimes they are there, but get away. Sometimes they are there, and do not get away. It is not *la grande guerre,* of course, but it is—what you call—good fun. . . . Ah ! your carriage is ready. Good-bye. *Bon voyage.* Good luck to my expedition against Mohammed Hassan ? Thank you very much. *Au revoir.*' . . .

Twenty-four hours later we were inside the city gates of Teheran.

CHAPTER XIII

TEHERAN TO ISPAHAN BY POST-WAGON

LIKE Meshed, Teheran in itself does not claim the attention of the passing traveller to any great degree, more especially perhaps if his stay there be only a week, as mine was. As the capital of Persia, Teheran—again like Meshed—is of considerable political import, holding as it does the seat of the Supreme Government, besides the legations of the Foreign Powers. But since politics are outside the scope of this book, we can 'skip' Teheran—doubtless to the relief of the reader—as we did Meshed, and make for the road without more delay.

You can travel in Persia by camel, mule, or, if the road permits, by carriage, but there is also a fourth way—by post-wagon. This is not a way that is in any degree to be recommended, as can be imagined when it is understood: That you drive night and day; that you may be packed with your fellow-passengers tight as any sardine; that you have neither a seat below you—save for the hard and knobby postal packages—nor a covering above your head to protect you against snow, sun, or rain, nor aught of railing at the sides to prevent your falling out; and that finally and lastly the wagon is entirely innocent of springs. You who read this may perhaps in India have driven in an *Ekka* out

shooting, or at home have taken a lift in a country-cart —what we call a 'butt' over in Ireland. Multiply the maximum amount of possible jolting endured in either of the above by two, and imagine this jolting to continue for whole days and nights continuously, save for short halts of a few hours now and then, and you will have some idea of my experiences from Teheran to Ispahan.

Yet with all this the post-wagon has two great advantages: first it is cheap, second it is quick. If I had taken a carriage it would have cost me about £24, plus another £4 for the freight of any surplus luggage. My fare on the post-wagon with all my luggage and one servant was £6 10s. With a caravan I should have taken twelve to thirteen days over the journey; the post-wagon did it in four and a half.

So one morning late in February found myself, Rags, and my Persian servant, perched up on the top of the bales and bundles of the post-wagon, with four or five other passengers, being trundled out of Teheran. All roads in Persia are bad, but those in the vicinity of, or actually in, the towns themselves are peculiarly atrocious. The constant traffic has worn away the surface into a system of ridges and furrows, and either they have been left as they are, or a half-hearted pretence of repair has been attempted by throwing down blocks of stone of all shapes and sizes indiscriminately over the road. In either case the effect on a springless cart can be imagined, and also on an unhappy Englishman riding in the said cart, who, though not unaccustomed to other modes of Eastern travel, had as yet not expiated his sins by experiencing that instrument of torture—the post-wagon. Bump



THE POST-WAGON



ENTRANCE TO BAZAARS

[*p.* 251

—bump, bump. *Bump*, bump—*Bump*. My spine began to jar terribly, my teeth to rattle in my head; my head itself felt that at any moment it might roll off my shoulders. And this was only the very beginning. We had scarce been an hour on the road, and there were four live-long days and nights before me of this damnable cup-and-ball performance.

Just outside the city we passed Persia's one and only railway line. This is on a miniature scale, in length not more than six miles or so, and is only remarkable, of course, because it *is* the one and only the country possesses. Seeing it impresses on one's mind the fact that when travelling in Persia ninety-nine out of a hundred people one meets—rich or poor, great or small—have never seen a real railway. That this fact does not obviously strike one in intercourse with the people—which it does not—is a decided tribute to the intelligence of the Persian, who can as a rule discuss affairs at large—whether in his own country or outside—as if he had all the conveniences of civilised locomotion at his door.

By this time the road had slightly improved, so I was able to take stock of my travelling companions—all natives of Persia. One was a young *khan* of sorts. He was armed to the teeth—as the Persian loves to be when he can afford it—with a dagger and revolver stuck in his belt and a rifle slung across his back. At the other end of the social scale—the *khan* represented the aristocracy—was an Armenian Christian, whom everybody rather sat on, actually as well as metaphorically, whenever the wagon bumped more than ordinarily. Between these two extremes were others, notably a very friendly young merchant. He and I

were the only passengers going the whole way to Ispahan, the rest being bound for various places *en route*.

But the most outstanding figure of our circle was the postman. Drivers were changed with our horses at every stage, and it was of course only by changing horses that we could keep going day and night. But the postman was responsible for the mails and packages, and as such travelled the whole way. Our postman was a short, sturdy individual, with a smack of the sailor about him, rolling slightly in his gait, and possessing an air of bluff cheerfulness. Indeed the life he lived was not unlike that of a dry-land sailor—if one can use such an expression. He spent his time in post-wagon voyages up and down the north of Persia. Sometimes—as at present—from Teheran to Ispahan, then the return voyage back. Then as far as Shahrud on the Meshed road. Another time up to Resht, with perhaps a side-excursion as far as Hamadan. At the end of each voyage he had four or five days in port, and doubtless, like his prototype, a wife—or two or three—in each. But even with these rests he must have had a frame like cast-iron, and an inside like an ostrich's, to stand the life he had to lead between-whiles. *Ex officio* he was the skipper of our craft, settled the durations of halts, apportioned us our various places, and acted as arbitrator in any quarrels that might arise amongst strangers so much thrown together in more senses than one.

For the rest, we were all more or less on equality, with the real equality of the Mohammedan East, where alone true democracy is to be found, and not the sham article which usually passes for such in your snobbish,

purse-proud West. Needless to say, I was not so foolish under the circumstances as to pretend to any special rights and privileges on the score of being a 'sahib.' I was travelling third-class—a private carriage, or my own caravan, would have represented first—and I did not expect to be treated anyhow else than as a third-class passenger. For from the point of view of common sense either you travel first-class, in which case—if it so pleases you—you are at liberty to put on first-class airs, or you travel third, when you must expect third-class treatment. But to travel third and put on first-class airs is simply to make yourself ridiculous. Yet nevertheless it cannot entirely be excluded from a list of minor British failings. But though, or perhaps because, I did not make any pretensions over my fellow-passengers, I found they were made for me. Every one was politeness itself; and the postman, by pulling bundles here and there, made me a sort of arm-chair, which, if not anything approaching actual comfort, was not far removed from it in comparison to the precarious perches of the others. Doubtless this service was performed for me with one eye on a tip at Ispahan, but that did not make it any the less welcome. On the other hand, the young merchant, and the *khan*, who could have had no hopes of a *peshkush*, were equally friendly, and would have me partake of their supplies—we all carried these with us—besides their *arrack* (native spirit). In politeness, of course, I could not refuse, and indeed found the latter quite acceptable when night came on with its accompanying cold. For, though the worst of the winter was over, it was still very uncomfortably chilly.

Another proof of the amenability of my companions

was their compliance to the company of Rags. The Persian is not a very strict Mohammedan in some ways, but has more than the ordinary Mohammedan objection to dogs. To Rags, however, they seemed to have no objection; in fact, his antics when put out to run for a stage, and the way he would encourage the lagging horses by his shrill barks, amused them vastly. But then Rags, being an old traveller, has the knack of effacing himself at the right time; and indeed I have met very few of East or West who have not been fast friends with him after the shortest of acquaintances, which statement you may discount as that of a prejudiced and proud master, but which is true nevertheless.

About an hour after leaving Teheran we reached the shrine of Shah Abbas, which is especially patronised by women, who go there to pray for various feminine mercies. But unless bazaar gossip is quite at fault, these visits are often undertaken with other—and less pious—ends in view, and cover a multitude of clandestine flirtations, Friday—when the shrine is filled with numbers of both sexes—being the fashionable day for rendezvous. Indeed, there is a Persian proverb to the effect that by a visit to the shrine of Shah Abbas one can achieve the double object of acquiring merit and amusing oneself. Intrigue of this sort is much facilitated by the universal wearing of the veil, which covers the woman from head to foot, and thus forms an impenetrable disguise. Once in it, and out of her house, the fair *intrigante* can pass where she wills, unrecognised and unchallenged, for to attempt to see the face of a veiled woman is one of the seven deadly Mohammedan sins.

The day bumped and jolted itself away. We changed horses at the *manzils*, stopped to drink tea at the wayside *khawa-khanas*, and beguiled the time in conversation. This latter covered most subjects: national and local politics, the length of the stages, the prospects of the weather, the state of the road, but generally veered back to the all-engrossing subject of robbers. And in a country where fully half of the travelling public have had a nodding acquaintance with these gentry, and the other half look upon it but as a pleasure deferred, the topic is indeed an absorbing one. Formerly, for instance, the Teheran-Ispahan road was in a perilous condition owing to the attentions of one Naib Hussain, a noted outlaw, who at the head of a band of brigands, robbed right and left all who went upon the road—whether private travellers, caravans, or post-wagons. On one occasion he seized the post-horses at the various stages, in consequence of which both the post-wagon and any travellers driving through had for a long time to use the same animals all the way, thus doing the journey in twelve or thirteen days instead of four or five. And this on the supposition that they did not meet the redoubtable Naib Hussain himself. The Persian Government made various attempts to catch him, but without success, *and finally gave over the charge of the road into his hands.* This seems to the Westerner a somewhat extraordinary step to take, but as a matter of fact is by no means an uncommon occurrence in the Persia of to-day, and as a last expedient this setting of a thief to catch a thief acts better than might be expected.

Just at present, however, Naib Hussain was on his best behaviour, and beyond an occasional 'hold-up'

of a post-wagon—unfortunately it was on a post-wagon that we were travelling—by local robbers, the road was safe—for Persia.

Evening came, and about two hours after dusk we made one of our usual halts at a *khawa-khana*. The *khawa-khana* is a great institution for the comfort of the traveller, and is to be found all along the main routes of Persia—sometimes in villages, sometimes a lonely little mud hut by the side of the road far from any habitation. In the Turkish *khawa-khana* coffee as well as tea can be had, but in the Persian only tea, served in little glasses, fresh from the *samovar*, boiling hot, and very grateful to the benumbed wayfarer.

The hands of my watch pointed to eight o'clock. This time twenty-four hours ago I had been dining out at Teheran, and now—I looked round and smiled, for it was one of those sharp contrasts which only Eastern travel can give. The room—the *khawa-khana* only had one—was low, and of unadorned mud throughout. On the four sides were raised mud divans. In one corner was a shelf projecting from the wall, holding a *samovar*, tea-cups, a few packets of cigarettes. In the middle was a large square hole, with the glowing embers of a fire. Various household utensils—brushes, *qaleāns*, besides rolls of bedding—were strewn here and there. Light was supplied by a small flickering *chirāg* (earthen lamp), though now and then when a fresh bundle of fuel was flung on the fire the leaping flames would fill the room with bright illumination, only to sink and leave us in semi-darkness again, with the faces and forms of my companions now seen, now lost, in the play of sheen and shadow.

The above for the gay dinner-table of the night

before; and for the elaborate six-course dinner, native unleavened bread, hard-boiled eggs, and half a cold chicken, somewhat tough!

Then out into the road once more. This time I managed to make myself tolerably at ease, reclining with my rugs and cushions under me to break the force of that abominable jolting. The young merchant aforesaid insisted on sharing his quilt with me, which was more than large enough to cover the two of us comfortably, and so we voyaged through the night. All around stretched the desolate wastes; the only sounds that broke the stillness were the creaking of the cart-wheels, the muffled stamp of the horses, and now and then the sleepy ejaculations of the driver. It was not unpleasant, I reflected, this driving *à la belle étoile*, and so fell asleep.

Some time later in the night I was awakened by the wagon stopping, and found ourselves halted before a *khawa-khana*, from the open door of which came the gleam of a fire, thrice welcome since I was by now chilled to the bone. Only the postman had descended; the muffled figures of my other companions were still slumbering around me in various attitudes of cramped discomfort. Following the postman, I found him and an old man—the owner of the hut—crouched over a dying fire, and squatted myself in silence. No one spoke a word—the three of us might have been under a vow of perpetual dumbness—and there we sat until the blood once more had tingled to my hands and feet, when the postman made a gesture towards the door, and, still in silence, we arose, passed out, clambered to our seats, and drove away.

Travel memories are curious things, and while

other—and much more important—incidents are blurred to me, this little midnight charade is still clear. Why, I do not know.

The next time I woke it was in the grey dawn, and we were changing horses before a *manzil.*

From this time forward the rigours of the journey may be said to have commenced. I found I had paid for my night's rest by contracting a pain in my back, just below my right shoulder, the effect of either the night's cold, or a sprain brought on by the jolting. In either case it was somewhat painful, and absolutely forbade any further lying down. So the only repose I could now obtain—beyond uneasy cat-naps in a sitting position—was at the half-hour halts to change horses, or when we came to some place of importance which merited a stay of some duration.

Such a place we reached about mid-day—Kum, to wit, holy beyond all the cities of Persia save Meshed, and, after the immemorial custom of *bast,* a refuge for all fleeing from the arm of the law or the hand of private vengeance. Hither you will remember did Hajji Baba flee from the Shah, after his tragic-ending *amour* with Zeenab, the Kurdish slave, and here did he in part expiate his sins by having to attune his pleasure-loving soul to the gloomy routine of the stern ascetics in the shrine.

But for me city and shrine were of far less moment than rest and food—food warm and freshly cooked, not the cold scraps that had been my portion on the road. And both of these were forthcoming. First a room, where Ismail—my servant—laid out my bedding, on which I threw myself with a blessed sense of rest from motion, far exceeding even that of the

passenger just landed from a rough Channel crossing; and later, savoury Persian *kabobs*, with great flaps of fresh-baked bread soaked in the gravy thereof.

But our halt came to an end all too soon, and once again we were pounding along the road. During the afternoon one of our party pointed out a spot where he had two months previously been the victim of a 'robbery under arms,' and related how it had happened. '*W'Allah*, it was just here I was robbed, where you see that small *burje* (tower) over yonder! At the time I was travelling up to Teheran there were some *sarbazes* in it to guard the road. But just before I passed some of Naib Hussain's men had come down, taken away the rifles from the *sarbazes*, and placed themselves in the tower instead, having first made the *sarbazes* prisoners. This was before the *Hukumut* (Government) had made Naib Hussain a *rahdar* (guardian of the road). Did the *sarbazes* fight? Not they, the Sons of Dogs! When we neared this *burje* the *duzdān* (robbers) fired over our heads as a sign for us to stop. We stopped. What could we do? We had no guard, and if we had had one they would only have been *sarbazes*, and therefore altogether useless. I am a follower of Prince So-and-so, in Teheran, and I was taking up a caravan for him from Kāshān—mules and horses, and merchandise of all sorts. Well—the *duzdān* took everything. They even stripped me of my coat, the Sons of Burnt Fathers! They then led me, and the *sarbazes* whom they had taken prisoners, off the road for about four miles to the top of those hills you see over there, in order that we should not give the alarm. There they left us, and there we had to stay all night, not being able to find our way back in the dark. It was winter,

too, and I had no coat. Cold! By Hazarat Abbas, I swear to you I nearly died. Next morning we found our way to that village back there, where we have just drunk tea. . . . I am now going down to Kāshān to bring the stolen property back to Teheran. The *Hukumut* brought pressure on Naib Hussain, when they made him *rahdar*, to give back the Prince's goods. He says he has got them all collected in Kāshān now. Robbed again when I am returning? *Khudā Medānad* (God knows).'

This may seem a very philosophical way of regarding robbery with violence directed at oneself, but as a matter of fact it is the only attitude for the traveller to adopt in present-day Persia, whether the victim be a Persian or a European. The robbers are not out for fighting, and take very good care that there shall be no chance of such an unpleasant eventuality. The wayfarer—perhaps accompanied by a few *sarbazes*—while wending his way over some wild pass, of a sudden hears shots, and the unpleasant zip-zip of bullets above his head. At the same time half a dozen or half a score of bandits, all armed with rifles—of which all are pointed at him and his caravan—appear on each flank of the hillside above his head. The odds—twelve to one, or, counting the *sarbazes*, twelve to three or four—surprise, arms, and position all on the side of the enemy. Some of the bandits come down the hill; the others remain *en arrière*, ready to open a fusillade should the slightest show of resistance be made. What is the wayfarer to do? Under the above circumstances, which hitherto it has been my fortune to escape, I have no hesitation in saying that I should do—nothing! And this is what the wayfarer very

sensibly does ; while there is the more reason for this course of action as the Persian brigand—if no resistance is shown—has no idea of murder, or indeed of actual ill-treatment as a rule. But still the victim has to put up with insults, perhaps with a certain amount of rough handling, and if during the process he loses his temper—as is only natural—and lays about him, the consequences may be serious.

The frequency of 'robbery under arms' in Persia may be gathered from the fact that, without exaggeration, five out of ten Europeans one meets there have either been robbed or have had encounters of sorts with robbers. The thing is so common that it crops up in casual conversation as one of the ordinary everyday events. Just as elsewhere you wish a traveller a comfortable journey, in Persia you wish him one free from robbers, and at a journey's end the first question you are asked is, 'No trouble from robbers ?'

Then ensued another period of darkness, which passed in nightmare fashion for me—crouched in a semi-sitting position, dozing at intervals, only to be sharply wakened by a twinge of pain if I sank backwards, or by the cold as it penetrated through my protection of rugs and wraps. The sole alleviations were the halts at the coffee-houses, or at the *manzils* for the changing of horses. Sometimes I would prefer not to alight, and to snatch a short period of complete repose while the post-carriage was at rest.

Another dawn, and by mid-day we were in Kāshān, the headquarters of the redoubtable Naib Hussain. Here I enjoyed—as at Kum—blessed relief for two hours, with more *kabobs*.

During the afternoon I had a peaceful passage-

of-arms with one of Naib Hussain's lieutenants, the commander of three or four dirty-looking rapscallions, collected in a coffee-house at which we had made a halt. This individual—after the manner of his class—was talking big, gasconading to an admiring circle as to the prowess and perfections of his lord and master, of the Persian in general, and more particularly of himself. Half of all this was of course to my address.

'Sahib,' he concluded, in the loud and blustering tone which his kidney adopt to the foreign traveller whenever they meditate some extortion, 'I want a present : I want *rahdari*.'

The said tone invariably has an irritating effect on the foreign ear, so :

'I'm not deaf,' I said ; 'there's no need to shout. And why do you want a present ?—for being such a good talker ? '

The Persian is a man of wit himself, and appreciates even a clumsy attempt at it on the part of the foreigner. So the 'house' laughed, and the laugh was with me. Once you have made the Oriental laugh, you have him half over to your side. Travellers in very tight places have got out of them safe and sound by so doing—have even saved their lives thereby. Mine was of course in no sense a tight place, but the lieutenant was none the less impressed, and continued in politer tones.

'No, Sahib. I want *rahdari*—toll for guarding the road. If I and my men were not here the robbers would have taken everything you had—down to your boots.'

'And now *you* want to take everything I have instead ? '

'No, Sahib ; *Bejan-I-Shuma* (by your life), I have

no such evil thoughts. I only want a small present. *W'Allah*, the times are hard.'

'*Khub*; very well, here's something to buy tobacco with,' and I flicked a two-*kran* piece (about nine-pence) across to him. He looked at it in a dissatisfied way, and began grumbling. However, just at that moment the postman—doubtless with intention—said it was time to go, so we got on board and drove off.

Rahdari is a common nuisance on many Persian roads. Bodies of local tribesmen, who may or may not be recognised by the Government as guardians of the road *de jure*, institute themselves as such *de facto*, and levy toll on all caravans which pass. The toll is merely a form of polite blackmail, as, if *rahdari* is not given, it is taken, as well probably as the beasts, goods, and personal effects of the traveller. Nor does a single payment of *rahdari* suffice. No sooner has the unfortunate traveller satisfied one band of blood-suckers than another band—sometimes only a few miles on—is met with, and so forth. The amount of *rahdari* that has to be paid on some roads—the Ispahan-Shiraz-Bushire route, for example—is very large, and the traveller may be bled to the tune of fifty *tomans* (about £10) and upwards, having at the same time no guarantee that he may not be stripped and robbed into the bargain. My modest expenditure of ninepence, therefore, over a journey of about two hundred and seventy miles, may be said to have been very well laid out.

By evening I was afflicted by a new torture, in addition to the sprained shoulder—to wit, indigestion. My digestion—as indeed must be the case if the traveller in the East is to travel with any degree of pleasure—

is as good as when at school I could demolish a tin of sardines, eke one of potted meat, plus half a pot of strawberry jam, finish up with a water-melon, and feel merely pleasantly replete. But this continuous jolting coming hard upon such meals as I had eaten at Kum and Kāshān, with no time for sleep, no time for rest, had done its deadly work, and my digestion succumbed.

This is an age when the cry is all for new things, new sensations, new experiences. If you, oh, reader, are among those that cry, proceed forthwith to Persia, to be particular, to Teheran, and there take the post-wagon for Ispahan. At about the close of the third day out you will, I guarantee, have an entirely new experience, for you will know what it must have been like to be broken on the wheel—that most shocking of mediæval tortures.

And broken on the wheel I was all that night and all the next day, hour after hour, until about ten o'clock on the following night, when—taking the opportunity of a stop at a *manzil*—I mutinied, and refused to go further unless I was given two hours' sleep. The postman consented without much demur—a few hours more or less make not much difference to a post whose arrival at all is something to be thankful for; and when my bedding had been spread in a corner of the *khawa-khana* I fell into a species of torpor, from which it was almost with the reluctance of one rising from the dead that I dragged myself when my respite was finished.

Now here is a curious point. Ismail, my servant—I had procured him in Teheran where my previous one had remained—was a frail old body whom, in any sort

of trial of bodily strength, including that of long marching, I could have defeated with the greatest of ease. Yet now, when his master was laid out, more or less of a wreck, Ismail himself seemed very little the worse for wear. The truth is, of course, that where the Western excels in active endurance, the Eastern excels in passive, and when dealing with the East, and judging it by Western standards, it is necessary to remember this.

At about noon the next day—our fifth from Teheran—we reached Ispahan, where I found the kind hospitality of the British Consulate open to me, and after the luxury of a bath—my ablutions on the road had been confined to the use of a tooth-brush—what a thrice-blessed *Nirvana* it was to slip between cool, clean sheets and slide softly into sleep, and wake again, not to the torture of the wheel, but to the ineffable bliss of turning over and dropping off to sleep once more.

CHAPTER XIV

ISPAHAN

I HAD passed through two notable Persian cities—one the capital—before reaching Ispahan, and in each had found my pen tongue-tied. Do what I would not a word would come; as far as a record in my diary was concerned, these two great cities had remained a blank.

But I had not given in thus without an effort, you may be sure. I knew what was popularly due from the traveller: that at places of interest and note, he should also be correspondingly interested—at any rate on paper.

'Come,' I had said stoutly to myself, 'this will never do. Other travellers have found nice things to say about these two "historic spots," why can't you? Sit down, light your pipe, and start away. Put "Meshed" at the head of one sheet of paper and "Teheran" at the head of another; or put them both in one sheet, "Meshed and Teheran," and call it a comparison, or call it anything you like. But for heaven's sake do something!'

But it was of no avail! Even with the burning of much tobacco I invoked the Muse in vain, and I had verily begun to fear that I would leave Persia a discredited scribbler, one who in 'historic spots' failed to be properly interested—even on paper.

ISPAHAN FROM THE ALI KAPPI GATE

However, Ispahan saved my reputation in that direction. For at this 'historic spot,' contrarily enough, I *did* find myself interested, both off and on paper, and—happy state for the recorder, and reader, of impressions of travel—found my difficulties not in what to write, but in what to forbear. . . .

It is early afternoon, and the locality the great Ali Verdi Khan Bridge outside the city. No city can be really beautiful without its river, and though the Zendeh Rud—during the greater part of the year a wide sandy bed holding innumerable shallow water-courses—cannot for an instant compare with the broad sheet of the Jhelum at Srinagar for instance, or that of the Tigris at Baghdad, still it is running water, and above all gives excuse for one, nay two—for the Pul-i-Khaju is but a mile farther down—of the finest bridges that ever the brain of an architect conceived. Perhaps even the fact that the excuse for such a bridge is so slight, that it is so obvious that something much less fine would have been just as useful, attracts the more. It is like hearing a good musician giving of his best to a small and unappreciative audience. Something much less inspired would do just as well. But the musician either plays his best, or plays not at all.

And it must have been in something of this spirit that the great Emperor Shah Abbas and his chief architect sketched out the schemes of the Ali Verdi Khan Bridge. The imperial city of Ispahan had no majestic river, even the king of kings himself could not give it that, but, by Allah! he could give it such a bridge as no other city in the world possessed. And so there it stands to this day, with its broad paved road-way, its covered arcades pierced through the thickness

of the walls, its open promenades along the breadth thereof, its round towers, its staircases, its immense and solid foundations, its innumerable arches—stately, spacious, strong, and enduring.

And under it always—running water. What a simple affair to grow enthusiastic about ? In other and more favoured countries, perhaps, but not in Persia. For Persia is not, as sometimes popularly supposed, one vast rose garden, a land flowing with milk and honey. Rather is it one vast desert, with oases—singularly rich and fruitful oases some of them, but still oases—scattered hither and thither over it. And even when near and around these oases there is water, it is carried in *kanats* (underground channels) far from sight or sound. So to the traveller in this thirsty land the sound and sight of running water—whenever rarely met—becomes an irresistible lure, and on his road the most inconsiderable rivulet will bring him off his horse to sit awhile by its banks and listen to its soft music.

Nor is the present case any exception to the general rule, and so I dismount and, clambering down one of the arches of the bridge, take my seat almost level with the stream. There is something peculiarly mesmeric to the eyes in the glittering ripples which rush past, and to the ears in the gentle murmuring and crooning which reaches them. And as to the charms and suggestiveness of the stream were added the associations of the old bridge above, it will be guessed that I sat long, long enough at any rate to obtain *kaif*.

And *kaif*? What is *kaif* ? If you look it up in a Persian dictionary you will find that it means 'rest, contentment,' or something like that. But it really

means much more, and is really untranslatable. Perhaps in some senses it may come near to *Nirvana*; for there are many *kaifs*, not one. There is the *kaif-i-tareak*,—the *kaif* of opium, the 'just and subtle'; the *kaif-i-khabedan*—that of sleep; the *kaif-i-qaleān*—that of smoking; and many others, among which perhaps we may include the *kaif* of 'him who sits under old bridges, listening to the sound of ancient streams.'

But *kaif* is only given to mortals for short periods at a time, and it is better to leave it before it leaves you. So again I mount and ride down the farther ramp of the bridge, away to the great cemetery. Taking it in all, it must be the largest in existence, for it extends for miles and miles. And this size is rendered possible by the fact that the Mohammedan takes little thought as to the interment of his dead. Death is to him so much less an important event than it is to the Christian that he does not think it worth while to surround it with many forms and ceremonies. Thus, except in the neighbourhood of some famous shrine, as at Meshed, where ground for burial purposes is considered to be specially holy—and incidentally commands a good price—he considers all earth to be consecrated, and chooses some spot unsuitable for cultivation. Nor does he surround it with a wall, nor care for the graves; and a greater contrast to our graveyard—neat, enclosed, well-kept, embowered with cool green grass, under the shadow of trees—than the Mohammedan cemetery, set in barren land where no vegetation thrives, can hardly be found.

Every now and again we pass newly-dug graves with a little group of mourners around. Near one of them, in the shadow of a large mausoleum, a man has

set up a little *khawa-khana*. He is doing a fair trade, and his customers are sipping tea, eating sweets, dates, bread, and what not, and pulling at their *qaleāns* (pipes). 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow . . .'

Then back again to the bridge and across it, and up the Chenār Bagh—the great avenue of Ispahan. In the old days, with its water-channels falling in cascades from terrace to terrace, its rows of beautiful *chenār* trees, its flanking gardens and stately houses, in whose balconies a gaily dressed crowd would collect to watch the nobles and their retinues pass and repass below, the Chenār Bagh was indeed as worthy of Ispahan as Ispahan of it. And now! The terraces and channels are broken, most of the trees are cut down, the houses have fallen to ruins; but still in another sense—if one wishes to be cynical—one can say that the Ispahan of to-day and its great avenue are worthy the one of the other. Yet though fallen from its high estate, the Chenār Bagh is interesting of an evening, as Ispahan at that hour comes out to 'eat the air,' and the Bagh being the fashionable promenade one can pick out many prominent types.

Three Bakhtiari horsemen clatter past; the Persian on horseback thinks more of impressing all and sundry with the speed of his progress than of the safety of the pedestrian, or of the hoofs of his horse, which he will gallop at speed over the hardest of stony grounds. All three look flushed, and the centre one sways slightly in his saddle. Doubtless they are returning from some gathering where they have 'looked upon the wine when it was red,' for the average Persian is not as strict as he might be where strong drink is concerned.

A missionary lady passes on a bicycle. This also

is a sign of the times. Ten years ago no European lady could thus have shown herself in a public place without fear of insult—or worse. But now there is little or no fanaticism, though there are doubtless fires latent and hidden away. And here come some of the class against whom, rather than against Europeans, whatever displays of fanaticism there may be are directed—a party of Armenians, proceeding to Julfa, their quarter on the other side of the river. Then some *Seyyids* (descendants of the Prophet), distinguished by their green shawls and turbans, seated upon white ambling donkeys, which still—as in Old Testament days—are a sign of honour and rank. Following them a party of four or five 'Young Persians'—gentlemen who wear high stiff collars and twirl canes. Perhaps one of them has been to Europe. They call each other *Monsieur* instead of *Jenab*, and are altogether very up-to-date, progressive, and Westernised. It is a question, however, whether a single uncouth tribesman, rifle in hand, is not a more vital factor in present-day Persian politics than these same young gentlemen.

Women, in head-to-toe enveloping shrouds of black, with white veils, are everywhere. They are mostly of the poorer classes, unencumbered by male belongings or attendants, and are therefore by no means too strict in keeping the said veils in their proper places; rather do they use those ends to coquetry, hiding but to entice the more, with many a trill of laughter amongst themselves, or a whispered jest to a passing loiterer. Doubtless not a few intrigues begin in the Chenār Bagh. A closed carriage whirls by, outriders before and behind. Inside one catches a glimpse of female forms, heavily

veiled. These are the harem of some great man, but—human nature being human nature, East or West—these high-born ladies probably envy their poorer sisters, at any rate for the moment, the greater freedom of obscurity.

By the time the end of the Chenār Bagh is reached, and we plunge into the bazaars, darkness has fallen. Late-night life, which plays such an important part in a Western city, with its theatres, restaurants, and what not, is quite wanting in an Eastern one, which some two hours after sunset is like a city of the dead. . . .

If you would view, with a single sweep of the eye, Ispahan, its length, its breadth, and its greatness—for despite its present decay, as purely Oriental cities go, it is still great—then should you climb to the top of the lofty Ali Kapi gate. This forms an entrance to the Royal Palace, and though now both gate and palace are crumbling and decaying, in the ancient days the former was sacred as well as royal, and to cross its threshold even proud kings were fain to dismount and proceed on foot.

But where formerly was all the pomp of a palace gate, the lounging guards, the caparisoned horses, the come and go of gorgeous retinues, now there is only one decrepit old man, who keeps the key of the door, and this—even for an unbeliever, if he have official credentials, and credentials unofficial in the shape of a small coin—he is nothing loth to open ; and so I pass upwards and upwards, and reaching the top, lean—a little out of breath—against the parapet and look around.

Below at a giddy depth, directly beneath one's feet, the Midan-i-Shah (the Royal Square) unfolds its

splendid spaciousness. The sight of this alone is worth the climb, for it is one of the great squares of the world, being some 600 yards in length by 200 in width. It is surrounded by a low range of two-storied buildings, the lower of which originally formed shops and the upper balconies, from which sight-seers would watch by day the busy scene below, when the square would be covered with the booths and tents of itinerant vendors, and at night—with these evicted—the shows and amusements provided by acrobats, jugglers, wrestlers, story-tellers, and the like.

All these long since have passed to their own place, and the Midan now—whether by night or day—presents a half-deserted appearance, an enormous white empty space in the very heart of the thronging city. But it is only by imagined comparison with the past, and by reason of its size—which would dwarf any but the largest of crowds—that the Midan seems deserted by day. Two great bazaars flow into its northern and upper western ends, which are thus covered by a whirlpool of black ant-like figures. From this pool the stream sets again towards the southern end, but trickling fainter as it proceeds, until it resolves itself into single black dots moving across the glaring sun-baked expanse.

Most of these dots appear to be bound mosque-wards, for it is near high noon, and at the southern end of the Midan the beautiful Musjid-i-Shah (Royal Mosque) heaves its glittering minarets and green domes into the sky. The voice of a muezzin, exceedingly high-pitched, incredibly far-reaching, comes faint across the abyss like one calling from another world. The black dots increase their pace, approach, and are

finally engulfed by the great doorway of the mosque. The Midan, save always for that vigorous whirlpool at its northern end, becomes deserted once more.

Yet though the black dots have disappeared, one somewhat larger than the rest still remains. It has the air after one has looked long of being some sort of erection. In point of fact it is a gallows. From this height it naturally has a microscopic appearance, but even at close quarters it is a very poor affair, bearing an exact resemblance to a pair of Association football goal-posts and cross-bar. The science of the 'drop' has not yet found its way into Persia, and the condemned man is strangled by being drawn slowly upwards. The bar is only some eight feet high, so that when an unfortunate wretch is suspended his toes must be within tantalising distance of the ground—altogether an unpleasant performance, and although during my stay in Ispahan I had an opportunity of witnessing an execution, I did not avail myself of it

So much for the Midan itself; and beyond lies the city—a great sea of flat roofs, broken here and there by minarets and cupolas, or patches of green to mark the presence of some notable's garden. And beyond the city again, the open plains and low foothills; and, traversing plains and foothills alike, faint lines—these only to be marked by the aid of glasses—converging on the city from all around the horizon. They are worth watching, those faint converging lines, for they are amongst the old things of the world—far older for instance than the ancient city at your feet—caravan tracks, to wit, and if you care to journey along them in imagination, 'over the hills and far away,' they will take you wherever you will: to Teheran in the north;

Kirman, Seistan, and the borders of Baluchistan in the east; Shiraz and Bushire in the south—if indeed you be not robbed on the way, for the tribes are 'out' in Fars; or to the west—through the Bakhtiari country to Ahwaz, to Mohammerah, where you can take ship back to India.

Loafing through the bazaars is as fascinating a way of spending the time in Ispahan as in other Oriental cities.

> Here are Persian carpets, ivory and pearl bloom,
> Tints to fill the heart of any child of man.
> Here are copper rose-bowls, leopard skins, emeralds,
> Scarlet slippers curly-toed, and beads from Kordofan.

And since the people are used to the sight of Europeans, and there is no open display of fanaticism, this practice can be indulged in without annoyance and at one's ease—that is to say, except for the beggars.

I had met these gentry previously in various places which are generally considered to be their happy hunting-grounds—Benares, Baghdad, Damascus, and Meshed, for example—but I can testify that those of Ispahan, in numbers, pertinacity, and wretchedness, are easily first. Doubtless the weather had something to do with it. To be a beggar in the summer, and bask against the sunny side of a wall—even on an empty stomach—may have its compensations; but to be a beggar in winter—and it was still winter before I left the city—and to cower in rags under snow, rain, and the biting winds, is another affair altogether. And it did not add to the enjoyment of my sight-seeing to be followed by two or three miserable wretches calling lamentably upon me for alms; or worse still—on a cold

evening, with the snow lying fresh on the ground—to pass 'creatures that once were men,' huddled at some street corner, doomed apparently to drag out the long night in the open. Especially pitiable was it when these creatures were women and children.

Naturally I gave *backshish* from time to time, but what could the few coins that I was able to spare do among such a welter of forlorn humanity? Moreover, such giving of *largesse* generally ended in my being quickly surrounded by a screaming, gesticulating mob of unfortunates, who, vulture-like, had scented their prey from afar, and three-quarters of whom had to go away unsatisfied. On one such occasion I endeavoured to single out an old blind man as the recipient of my alms, and was actually pressing the coin into his outstretched groping hand, when a wolfish-faced neighbour with only one leg promptly snatched it from him, and made off down the street at an exceedingly smart pace considering that his crutch had to stand him in lieu of a limb. I gave another coin to the old man and went my way, revolving the somewhat unpleasant thought that, though it was doubtless a very degraded exhibition of greed, if I had been in the place of that half-starved, ragged individual with the one leg, would I not have done the same? Nice feeling, after all, may be only a luxury for those of us who have full stomachs and a good coat to our backs.

Another beggar incident also remains in my memory. Proceeding homewards one night, I came upon two mites curled up on the side of the road, locked in each other's arms, alternately sobbing and imploring alms in the most pitiful manner. I would indeed



A PERSIAN BEGGAR



COFFEE-HOUSES

have had a heart of stone to have passed such a picture of infantile misery unmoved. So I stopped and presented each with something fairly substantial. No sooner was the *backshish* safe in their grubby paws, than, with elfish yells of delight, they arose swiftly, displaying peculiarly plump, well-nourished little bodies, and raced off, stopping only at a safe distance to indulge in a final war-dance, after which they disappeared into the darkness. I realised that, in common parlance, I had been 'had,' but the imps had managed their comedy with such realistic cunning, and it was such an amusing ending to an episode that at first sight had appeared very far from amusing, that I think I was just as tickled as they were—if not more so.

A peculiarly objectionable feature of the hunger and misery observable in Ispahan was the fact that it was in part due, not necessarily to bad harvests and other causes which might be included under the 'act of God,' but to the system of grain 'corners.' This vile practice is fairly general all over Persia, and indeed there is a special Persian word, *ihtika*, for our word 'corner.' A ring of merchants corner the grain and store it away in their *umbars* (storehouses), until such time as the prices rise to their satisfaction. To such an extent is this carried that sometimes the grain rots, when it is thrown away into the river, and the starving populace have the pleasure of seeing their life-blood floating down-stream. One might inquire what the local government are doing when this species of rascality is rampant. Unfortunately only too often it is best not to inquire too closely. The high officials and the 'cornerers' are not entirely

unconnected, you understand. But the game of Persian ' corners ' is not played without some risk to the players. At times the hunger-maddened people form themselves into a mob, rise, and take vengeance on their oppressors. One such occasion occurred in Ispahan, when the women of the city rose *en masse,* seized the chief ' cornerer,' and dragged him through the bazaars head downwards. By the time they reached the Midan, what with one thing and another, the wretch was nearly dead. The women, however, proceeded to make sure of his decease in ways which need not be detailed here, and finally hung up his corpse in a conspicuous place, so that ' all who ran might read.'

An eminent Persian merchant of Ispahan narrated the above to me, whereupon I remarked, ' W'Allah, een bisear khub aml bud ! ' which being freely interpreted means, 'And a devilish good thing too ! ' The eminent merchant looked shocked, and changed the subject. Perhaps he was one of the ' cornerers.'

Yet when all is said and done, it is not perhaps for the European traveller to hold up his hands in holy horror at such inhumanities. Further west too such things as 'corners,' 'sweated labour,' and the like are not unknown, and are indulged in by various intensely ' civilised ' and professedly ' Christian ' individuals. The pity seems to be that Persian methods of correction cannot be applied to these latter gentry as well as to their prototypes in Ispahan.

Another feature of interest which one encounters in one's bazaar wanderings are caravanserais, of which Ispahan—being a centre for many converging trade routes—contains many. What the hotel is to the

West, that the caravanserai is to the East, but striking indeed is the difference between them.

On entering the latter you find yourself in an open courtyard surrounded by a low building of two stories, the upper containing innumerable doors leading on to small cell-like chambers which are for the accommodation of the traveller, while the lower contains storerooms and stables in which goods and animals are housed in inclement weather. But if the day be fine all the 'fun of the fair' is concentrated in that same courtyard. Great piles of bales lie about in splendid confusion, with here and there perhaps an anxious merchant, list in hand, checking and re-checking his precious merchandise, or chaffering with prospective buyers in loud and vehement tones; camels, ponies, or mules—from its animals you can often guess by what road a caravan has come—are the special care of their owners, the muleteers or camelmen, who are engaged in grooming, feeding, watering, attending to the ailments—sore backs, cut knees, lamenesses, and the like—of their charges. Up above, through half-open doors, you catch a glimpse of the portly forms of the richer travellers, who with carpets and cushions have made their cells most comfortable, and now recline at ease after the toils of the journey, puffing luxuriously at their *qaleāns*, or sipping tea fresh from their *samovars*. At the serai gate is sometimes a sort of 'general store,' where all the requirements of the traveller, from fodder for his animals to bread, tobacco, and *kabobs*—balls of roasted mutton—for himself, can be purchased.

And since it is the East, there is no organisation of any sort to control this heterogeneous conglomera-

tion; and since it is the Mohammedan East, its pursuance is entirely democratic—that is to say, after the way of all democracies, each man is just a trifle better than his neighbour, and has the first right to finish his own business first. So the resulting confusion is a sort of minor maelstrom, and each individual elbows, curses, and cuffs his way towards his object, while the beasts after their kinds—with bubblings, snarls, squeals, shrill neighs, and bickerings amongst themselves—add to the turmoil and clamour.

And just as, when looking from that eminence over the city, you saw those far-away faint caravan tracks, and all the romance of Eastern travel immediately leapt to your mind, so it is here again at close quarters. For hither have those tracks led, and hither the caravans—after winning their slow and tortuous progress across desert, upland, and mountain, by peril of thirst, by peril of swollen fords, by peril of the snow passes, by peril of robbers—have victoriously come to rest.

During my travels in Persia I endeavoured to discover the first causes of caravanserais, how they came into existence and how were maintained; but without much success. The Persian is apparently quite content to take the caravanserai as he finds it, without bothering his head about the why and wherefore.

I learnt, however, that most of the caravanserais in present-day Persia owe their existence to a former 'king of kings,' the great Shah Abbas—he who made Ispahan an imperial city. This public-spirited monarch showed his interest in caravanserais to the extent of building up and down the length and breadth

of the land nine hundred and ninety-nine, a much more impressive number—when you come to think it over—than a mere thousand. The majority of these, like all the remnants of the ancient grandeur of Iran, are now in ruins.

Sometimes a rich Persian, as an act of piety, will build a caravanserai and leave a sum for its upkeep; or a guild of merchants, in order to attract and facilitate trade, will subscribe for the purpose between them and put a serai-keeper in charge, who levies a small toll for the night's lodging from the traveller. In other cases no attempt at upkeep is attempted, and the building is allowed to fall slowly to pieces. Until this process is completed some shopkeeper appoints himself serai-keeper, and makes his profit out of selling supplies. In such hostels lodging is free for the true (Moslem) believer, but not for the European wayfarer, who—in the popular imagination endowed with great riches—is expected on this, as on every other occasion, to put his hand in his pocket. . . .

Some distance to the west of Ispahan are the 'Shaking Minarets,' and if you, the traveller, with your sojourn for rest in the city sandwiched in between two long journeys, are energetic enough to spend half a day of it in the saddle, they at any rate form an object for a ride.

The Minarets are situated on the top of a shrine, are about thirty feet apart, and the 'performance' consists in an individual ascending the right-hand tower, which he causes to oscillate by swaying to and fro, when the motion is carried on to the other.

There are various ingenious explanations of the phenomenon—such as concealed connecting chains and

the like—which, being of a mechanical nature, were not of interest to me. What did appeal to me was that the towers did not shake to that extent which, in view of the long ride and the *backshish* bestowed, I had the right to expect. I said as much to the holy man, the incumbent of the shrine. In reply he pointed to a large crack in the right-hand tower, and intimated that if any more vigour was applied the whole concern might collapse about our ears. He had somewhat the air of a conjurer apologising for the failure of a trick, but at the same time relying on the generosity of his audience not to press the matter too far. Out of sympathy for his feelings—and still more perhaps from a regard for my own personal safety—I hastened to profess myself more than satisfied, and breathed freer when once more we were on firm ground.

Near the Minarets is the Atesh Gah (Place of Fire)—the mud-brick ruins of an old Zoroastrian fire-altar, perched up on the top of a small hill. You leave your horse at the bottom, clamber up—the ascent is somewhat steep—sit down with your back against a convenient wall—the remnants of the High Holy of Holies itself perhaps—and light your pipe. From the base of the hill poplar-bordered paths diverge in all directions through the chequered squares of green and brown cultivation, until they disappear towards the distant faint blue of the city itself. On the right the river—flashing in the sun—bears one or two small rafts floating slowly down. Elsewhere hills, not high, yet capped with snow, form the far horizon. And silence is over all.

And with such surroundings it is not strange perhaps that a sober melancholy steals over you.

For the ruins in whose shadow you sit represent a religion and a civilisation long since passed away, to give place to those of the city you look down on, which in turn is passing even now before the march of others, of which you from the West are a type and an example. And yours, in their turn, what of them? . . . Is all, then, 'vanity and a striving after wind'? . . . Is there nothing of permanence anywhere? nothing of certitude? . . . Nothing which does not suffer change? . . . Ah! but here *is* something which in its very impermanence *is* eternal: Change. Is this, then, the answer to that tremendous question: 'What is truth?' Perhaps.

> All thoughts, all creeds, all dreams are true,
> All visions wild and strange.
> Man is the measure of all truth
> Unto himself, all truth is change.

CHAPTER XV

ISPAHAN TO AHWAZ

In Ispahan I met C——, a brother officer, also Gulf-wards bound by the same route as myself, and so we naturally agreed to travel together, for travelling in company in Persia has several advantages.

For one thing, it greatly breaks the monotony to have some one to talk to during the long marches, and to smoke a sociable pipe with before turning in at night. For another it is individually cheaper, since it by no means costs double for a caravan of two than it does for that of one. For a third it is safer in case of accidents by the way, such as a fall, a fever, or a robber attack.

C—— had, moreover, knocked about the East in most places from the Balkans to Java, had indeed come up to Ispahan over the very road by which we proposed to go down, so neither of us was exactly a tyro with regard to Eastern travel.

The first arrangement to be made was with regard to our caravan, and here we were lucky enough to secure the services of one Hajji Hāshim—afterwards known to us by the former title alone—who agreed to hire us nine animals—eight mules and one pony—for a very moderate sum considering the rates then current on the road. Hajji himself was, moreover, vouched

for by various European residents in Ispahan as a 'first-rate man,' so we jumped at the bargain. The more so as C—— in coming up from Ahwaz had had a very lazy, truculent, and good-for-nothing lot of muleteers, who had given him endless trouble.

In consequence of these experiences C—— had made various notes as the points of friction came up, which notes he embodied in the contract to be signed by the aforesaid Hajji, who signed that document with the utmost amiability. But the reason for this amiability was clear when it transpired—*on the very morning of our start*—that the redoubtable Hajji had no intention of accompanying us himself—'he would send his nephew, who by God was even a better man than himself!'

It was a typical piece of Oriental trickery this, which even through our annoyance made us smile; but as sometimes happens with Eastern cunning it tripped up over its very duplicity. We had no wish to submit an old man—Hajji was no longer in his first youth—to separation from his home and an uncomfortable journey over a difficult road, and if only Hajji had let us know a day or two previously—at the commencement of the negotiations—we could have made other arrangements. But to make these now—which we would have been forced to do, as no one guaranteed that the nephew was a 'first-rate man,' and indeed our subsequent experience of him proved quite the contrary—was to postpone our start for another day, or two, or three, which was impossible, as—allowing for a safety margin—we had only just time to catch our steamer at Mohammerah. So our answer to Hajji was, in the old sporting parlance,

'Pay or play.' 'Either you come with us, or you go before the Governor for breach of contract.' Old Hajji after much expostulation preferred to 'Play,' and come with us. And in truth once this little affair was firmly settled, Hajji proved himself capable, cheerful, and energetic, in fact, a veritable Prince of Muleteers, and if ever I travel again in Persia I trust it will be under his guidance.

There was only one other matter to be arranged before we could strike the road, and that was the insurance of our baggage against 'robbery under arms.' The Ispahan-Ahwaz route is one of the safest in Persia, but this safety is only a matter of comparison with other routes, and we had a warning before us in the case of B——, already alluded to, who had been robbed and ill-treated on this very road. The well-known Lynch Company, who originally made the road from Ahwaz to Ispahan for the Bakhtiari chiefs, do business of this sort, but their local agent, an Armenian, curiously enough wished to strike out this very clause of 'robbery under arms.' We pointed out to him that it was hardly against 'fire at sea,' or 'shipwreck,' that we wished to insure our goods, whereupon he seemed to see the point, and allowed us to have our own way.

So at long last we were ready for the road, and one morning clattered out of Ispahan—quite a little cavalcade of twelve riding animals, and as many *souls*, to wit: C—— and myself, our two servants, Hajji and his two assistants, three mounted *Tofungchis* (Persian guards), and our two dogs. But does a dog come under the heading of a soul? That depends upon yourself. How runs 'My Dog'?

> The curate thinks you have no soul.
> I know that he has none. But you,
> Dear friend . . .

Personally, I disagree with the curate, and like to believe, or imagine—and sometimes these two are very much alike—that at any rate *my* dog, the one and only Rags, has a doggy soul of his own somewhere in his little woolly body.

Three of our party were somewhat in the nature of an unnecessary and expensive luxury : our *Tofungchis*, to wit. Unnecessary, because they were only to accompany us for the first three days during which no trouble could be anticipated, and expensive, since, according to custom, they expected to get paid for their services at the rate of so much per diem, going and returning. The gifts of princes, however, are difficult to refuse, and since this particular one had been politely pressed upon us by His Excellency the Governor of Ispahan, we had not liked to refuse.

There are some sensations one never loses, no matter how often they may be repeated, and that of starting on a journey is one of them. One feels it in a less degree every morning of a long travel, and in a greater when—as was now the case—after a short sojourn one sets out once more on the open road. . . .

The first day's march—as it should always be, when possible—was short and easy, but nevertheless we thought that two or three of our mules would never reach its end, so dead lame did they appear. And we reproached Hajji on the subject.

'*Khatir jama bāshed*' (Let not your hearts be disturbed), replied that individual ; 'it is only that they are a little stiff in starting. When we reach the

mountains you will see that they will run like the mountain sheep, *W'Allah.*'

And the curious thing is that this was quite true. The lame ones improved day by day, and when we reached the mountains, if they did not 'run like the mountain sheep' they went excellently well for all ordinary purposes.

And while on the subject of animals I may mention that while C—— bestrode a pony—quite a handsome little beast, and seemingly too good for such rough work as the 'Lynch Road'—I rode a mare mule. She was 'a rum 'un to look at, but a good 'un to go,' and while C—— cut the better figure, I was infinitely the more comfortable. My mount, indeed, was *really* like a 'mountain sheep' over the most precipitous paths, and when C—— had to dismount to lead his animal—which was by no means too sure-footed—I could keep my seat, leave the reins loose, and puff at a pipe with an easy mind. I christened her Rosinante, would feed her with bread at the end of the day's march, and grew quite fond of the old thing long before we reached Ahwaz.

Our *manzil* that night was in a village by the side of a river, and C—— and I with the dogs rode on in the dusk, and waited on the farther bank for the arrival of the caravan.

The dusk turned to darkness, with the stars peeping out one by one. Just below us a mill sluice roared and churned. In front the bridge stretched white across the river, fast flowing and sombre, save when it flashed to foam in the sluice or against the arches of the roadway. The scene was not without its charm. It was our first night upon the road, and we

waited patiently enough, until presently up came the caravan with a jingle of bells and men's voices, filing in sharp silhouettes across the bridge, to halt finally in a caravanserai near by.

But it was some appreciable time later—as it was the first night out—before the caravan was actually at rest, all hands being strange to each other, and working consequently without proper organisation or right division of labour. At length, however, a room having been chosen for our habitation, the mules were unloaded and stabled, our bags and Yakdans opened, their contents—cooking-pots, camp-beds, folding-beds, and what not—disgorged, and culinary operations set on foot.

Our beds lined the walls of the room, leaving just enough space in the middle for our table—two Yakdans put side by side, and then, until food should appear, we occupied ourselves in writing up our diaries for the day, or in perusing such literature as we had brought with us.

At length, and none too soon for the aching voids within us, the evening meal was borne in—very simple, merely stew with piles of fresh-baked native bread. But for my share in that dish of stew, Esau-like, I would have bartered my birthright willingly, or I am afraid my soul, or Rags' either, if it had been in the power of the Evil One to suggest such a bargain at such a moment.

And following the evening meal, the best hour perhaps—after that of the start—of the whole twenty-four of a travelling day, given up to digestion, a feeling of very pleasant fatigue, tobacco, and a study of the next day's march from map and route-book.

And after that—bed.

The next morning the air was cold, with a chill wind, for the season—middle March—was still winter and a Persian winter can be as severe, or more so, than an English one. Snow had recently fallen in Ispahan, and on the Bakhtiari highlands—which were of a considerably higher elevation than the city, and through which the first ten or twelve days of our journey would lie—really inclement conditions might be expected.

Our way, at first over a rolling plain, soon crossed a hill pass, which was my initial experience of the difficulties of the Lynch Road. Perhaps the word 'road' deceives him, though after a little experience he ought to know that this expression in Persia is merely a country title, but there is no doubt that the impression which this particular piece of travel leaves on the mind of the wayfarer is that of respectful astonishment, and when accomplished, of heartfelt thankfulness. For the Lynch Road now ascending the steep hillsides, now descending their equally precipitous counter-slopes—in either case more often than not strewn thickly with great boulders, now skirting the dizzy edges of ravines, or driving itself over some high mountain-pass—whose passage at all times is fraught with labour to the uttermost, and in winter with danger of death, the Lynch Road is—briefly speaking—one of the most difficult mule-tracks in the world! Two good suspension-bridges have been built over gorges, here and there the track has been banked up, but for the most part it has been left in its pristine state, and thus it remains—even in Iran—something outstanding in the way of hard



VIEW ON THE LYNCH ROAD



BAKHTIARIS

travelling, something which when covered gives you full right to consider yourself a 'blooded' Persian wayfarer.

But the present pass was nothing very formidable, as passes go, on the route, merely steepish, long, and boulder-strewn, and C—— and I proceeded to the top ahead of the caravan without much difficulty, old Rosinante taking it in her stride. Every now and then, halting for a breath, we could look back on an expanse of typical Persian landscape: brown rolling downs merging into dun-coloured plain, sparsely dotted with cultivation and rare villages; beyond, the inevitable circle of brown bare hills, the furthermost topped with snow; near at hand, the white stony track zigzagging upwards, with our caravan toiling midget-like far below; and over all, throwing moving chequers of light and shade, the hurrying clouds swept along by the wind. And this wind! Phew! Down on the plain merely pleasantly fresh, upon the hillside it cut like a razor-blade, making me feel—for all my furs and wraps—as nude as Father Adam before the Fall. So it was in the light of a special dispensation of Providence that we found—perched at the very summit of the pass—a *khawa-khana*, where boiling hot tea, and a toasting before a crackling fire, restored our circulation a little.

Soon—too soon for me—we heard the stamping of our caravan outside the door, and when all had partaken of tea we set out once more, this time downwards, but facing the same typical Persian landscape—brown downs, dun-coloured plain, patches of cultivation, scattered villages, encircling hills, white stony track and all.

Next day was chilly also, and that night we stayed in a village at the foot of the Zirrah Pass, and could watch its thin black track winding up and up amidst the precipitous snows, most formidable in appearance. Nor did its look belie it. For we learnt that only the day before four travellers had been caught by a blizzard while crossing and been frozen to death.

Wherefore Hajji decided that we would give the pass a wide berth, and cross the range at another place. So next morning found us travelling over the same rolling downs with the range on our left hand.

We had been some two hours on the road when we heard shots, and thought we could distinguish through our glasses the figures of galloping horsemen.

'Who be these, Hajji?' I said, affecting a considerably lighter tone than my feelings warranted—'*Duzdān?*'

'*Khatir jamah bāshed,*' which was a favourite expression of his; 'these are no robbers, but may be hunters, who are after gazelle. Moreover, there is no one along this road who dare touch a sahib'—I thought of B——. 'If any man even speaks to you with a loud voice, you have only to report him to the Sardar-i-Sang' (the Bahktiari chief in charge of the road) 'and he will have a thousand sticks broken across the soles of his feet. *Khatir jamah bāshed,* you are as safe here as in the streets of Teheran.' There crossed my mind the recollection of my journey to Damascus, of a certain morning when Shamoo, like Hajji, had in the course of desultory conversation testified with an oath to the complete and all-embracing safety of our route, and of the conflict with robbers which ensued within less than an hour,



A SUSPENSION BRIDGE

and therefore was considerably relieved when nothing more was seen or heard of our 'gazelle hunters.'

The next few hours gave me an experience of the most extraordinary piece of road I have ever traversed.

We entered a gorge on the level of a brawling torrent, and the track—barely wide enough for two laden mules to pass each other—wound steadily up the rocky face of the cliff. Now we were fifty, now a hundred, now a couple, and now many, many hundreds of feet above the river below, and with every hundred feet the track seemed to get proportionally narrower, until to all outward seeming our mules were clinging fly-like to the face of the gorge. On our right hand the cliff upwards to the sky, on our left the drop to the creaming torrent, in the midst rock-pigeons wheeling in the dizzy vault. Here and there the track crumbled away, doubtless only the result of the wind and weather, but with the very same appearance as if some slipping animal had made a last desperate scramble for life. Here and there a jutting rock would force our passing animals outwards until their loads hung well over the edge. For the most part our view was limited by the gloomy walls of the gorge, but now and then at some turn in the track these would open, and we would have a far, clear sight of the river winding through the plain, and of distant snow-covered hills.

And all the time the mules did bravely, as they picked their precarious upward way with little sure-footed, mincing steps. Now pulling themselves forward, as it were, with quick jerking heads and straining shoulders ; now slipping at the steeper bits, but recovering marvellously with a clatter of stones ;

now taking breath as opportunity offered, and scanning the forward passage with wise-cocked heads and appraising eyes. He is a half-breed is the mule, obstinate, unlovely, and unlovable, but on the hillside he is a mountaineer born and bred, and there your heart goes out to him.

Nor were the services of the muleteers any whit inferior to those of their charges. Now they would seize a tail to swing an animal round an awkward corner, now standing on the edge of a precipice they would adjust an overbalancing load, or a slipping knot, or again would jerk a stumbling beast to his feet, and ever they made the rocks ring again with their shouts of encouragement or objurgation.

Yes, he is a stout fellow, the Persian muleteer, from the crown of his tall conical cap to the soles of his shoes. Not uncommonly a somewhat surly, boorish, and disobliging individual, no more than his mule can he command your liking, but you cannot help giving him some sort of your admiration.

At length the track losing its head altogether—as well it might at such a height—turned itself from the abyss and streaked desperately up the sheer face of the cliff in zigzags of summer lightning for the space of three hundred yards or so.

How we accomplished that last piece of gymnastics I do not rightly know. For my own part I judged the time had come to trust to my own two feet rather than even to Rosinante's four, and dismounting and knotting the reins short on her neck left her to make her own pace, which she did adequately enough with the rest of the caravan at her heels, and after some strenuous scrambling, shouting, hauling, shoving, and

the like, we were over the cliff-edge on to flat ground, and the passage of the gorge was accomplished.

While we took a thrice-earned rest I looked at my watch. The passage of the gorge had taken us four hours. It has taken you, O Reader ! seated in your comfortable arm-chair, as many minutes to accomplish. How inadequate and vain a thing it is to attempt to reduce the sum of human effort to mere written words.

The next day, after the passage of another, but milder gorge, we arrived at one of the suspension-bridges already alluded to, and strange and incongruous indeed in the midst of this wild country did this product of civilisation appear. It spans a swift torrent with high rocky backs, and being the only crossing place for miles bears much traffic, especially in the spring and autumn when the great nomad tribes change their grounds, seeking either the Garamsir or Sardsir (winter or summer quarters) as the case may be.

It being now late winter, the first of the tribes—amongst themselves the Khans arrange times and orders of the tribal migrations—were on the move, seeking the upper pastures, which soon would be free of snow. So all day long there streamed across the bridge flocks of goats and sheep ; uncouth tribesmen, clad in sheepskins, with rifles slung across their backs ; droves of ponies, mules, or donkeys, carrying the tribal impedimenta—amongst which were the 'black booths,' as common to these nomads of the hills as to their Bedouin brethren of the plains ; impish boys not too young to have a dagger or two stuck in their belts ; young women, sometimes nursing squalling

infants, to whom they gave the breast to still their wails, and sometimes—perhaps fresh from their confinement, or a favourite of their lord and master—borne luxuriously in panniers; with behind all the old women, withered, bent, hobbling, not unpathetic, their time for the favour of men, the bearing of children, for riding in panniers, long past and gone.

The Bakhtiari Khans—who are in charge of the road—keep a couple of *mirzas* at the bridge to take toll of everything which passes, and these received us very hospitably in their house, giving us tea and light refreshments. But for all their hospitality they did not look the stuff to exact tolls from unruly tribesmen, at least so C—— and I remarked to each other. We were to learn, however, that there was mettle below their clerkly exteriors. For presently a hot argument arose between them and some half a dozen tribesmen who were standing sulkily outside, with a sheep in their midst. Both sides grew more and more heated, until finally the tribesmen after a volley of abuse retired, bearing the sheep with them. Whereupon our friends, snatching up cudgels, rushed into the fray, followed—not a little to our amusement and admiration—by an urchin of about twelve, the son of one of them. A good deal of indiscriminate scuffling and shouting took place, the unfortunate sheep being pulled this way and that as the tide of battle swayed, while the aforesaid urchin hung on the outskirts of the turmoil—like a 'half' outside a Rugby 'scrum'—every now and then planting a shrewd blow on the legs or posteriors of the enemy. But no real damage was effected, and presently the clerks returned—panting, dishevelled, but bearing the

sheep with them as the spoils of victorious war—when we learnt the cause of the uproar. To wit, the *mirzas*—after the fashion of the Orient—took good care to feather their own nests as well as those of their employers, and had imposed an unauthorised super-tax for themselves of one sheep or goat out of every hundred that passed. This super-tax some insolent shepherds had had the audacity to oppose. Hence the conflict.

Of course the *mirzas*—though it does not detract from their spirited behaviour—had the authority of the Khans behind them. And this authority is a fairly real one, as far as the Bakhtiaris themselves are concerned, since each Khan keeps around him a bodyguard of well-armed retainers—somewhat after the fashion of a mediæval baron—with which he rules his fief. And indeed we heard many tales from the poorer folk along our way of the tyranny of the chiefs.

The next night found us in very tight quarters. Arriving at a miserable hamlet after dark we found but one room, which the rightful owners would evacuate for our accommodation, and even this they would not have done had not they known Hajji of old, as indeed did every one along the road. So the muleteers joined the throng next door, while we, and our servants, and our kit, took possession of our palatial quarters. Half of it we gave up to our servants—in which to live, move, have their being, and cook—the other half belonged to us and the dogs.

In such a congested area we did not think it worth while to erect our camp-beds, or to unrobe unnecessarily, but laid our bedding on the floor, and, minus

our boots, slept as we were, or rather dozed uneasily, for though the occupants of the room had gone they had left their familiars behind them, and these—rejoicing in fresh Christian flesh—like good Muslims fell to and enjoyed many a hearty meal.

All night long at intervals I heard the ominous sound of rain pattering on the roof, and twice felt it on my face as it trickled through the cracks, when I had to 'take up my bed and walk' and seek a drier spot; and next morning, with no improvement in the weather, Hajji announced that there would be no travelling that day.

No travelling that day! Another twenty-four hours in that dog-hole!! Great Scott!!! And we expostulated with Hajji. But to no purpose. 'The stage was a bad one. The path would be impassable through mud. The mules would fall. *Khatir jamah bāshed;* if the sun comes out to-day to dry the ground to-morrow we start without fail.'

And here was another advantage of having a trustworthy henchman. With an inferior character as head of our caravan, we might have thought that for some ulterior purpose of his own he was delaying our progress, have forced him to start, and so marched on disaster. But with Hajji we knew it was a true bill and let it pass.

So once more into our prison and the hours dragged themselves away, in writing, dozing, or smoking. Though in truth there was enough smoke already with us from the cooking operations of our servants, and since as the day wore over this hung—there being no proper outlet—in a heavy haze to within about a few feet of the ground the only way to avoid being

stifled was to assume a half-recumbent position. Even so, every now and then the atmosphere would become unbearable, and either C—— or I would stagger forth —with watering eyes and a choking throat—to get a breath of fresh air. I am convinced that a prolonged stay in that inferno would have made me stone-blind. As it was my eyes smarted for the next day or two.

No! it was not exactly a red-letter day in my diary of travel. However,

> Now Zeus sends us sunshine, and now he sends us rain,

and towards the afternoon the sun came out, and after another night of the Black Hole we woke to a fine morning, and the road once more.

During the day's march we passed the actual spot where B—— had been ambushed, and personally I scanned the hillsides with an apprehensive eye, half expecting to hear the bullets of the Kuguloos zip above our heads. For it was a section of this peculiarly lawless tribe which had done the deed. Their country lies well to the south-west of the Bakhtiari territory, but on their raids a hundred miles or so is merely a long step for them. It was from the Kuguloos, and not from any of the Bakhtiaris, that C—— and I might expect trouble, if trouble occurred. But as the snow still blocked the south-western mountain passes we were fairly safe from molestation, which is about the utmost one can expect when travelling in present-day Persia.

But nothing occurred, and we went peacefully on our way, as might be expected, on the analogy that the safest place in a battleship—during action—is with one's head stuck through the last shot-hole!

That evening we reached another spot which also had been visited by the above tribe—a caravanserai, to wit, whose half-ruined state and flame-blackened walls bore truth to the tale of its occupants that in the autumn it had been gutted by the Kuguloos.

The next night we reached the second of the suspension-bridges, also spanning a deep and rapid torrent. And here too were tax-gatherers who took toll of those crossing the bridge.

But at the head of these was no mere clerk, but a young Khan—a scion of one of the chief Bakhtiari families. He likewise represented in his person a side of Persian life which is not without its interest for the student of either the politics or sociology of Iran—a Persian who had visited Europe.

The young Khan of the bridge seemed as a matter of fact a very nice boy. But it was only too evident how his sojourn of three years in Europe had unfitted him for his present position as a tribal chief. He was pathetically delighted to see us, travellers from that civilised outer world for which his soul longed, and—significant fact enough in itself—much preferred to converse in *French*. His talk, moreover, was all of Europe, and things and events European, where a Bakhtiari of the Bakhtiaris would have discussed local politics. He had under him some half a dozen tribesmen, at whose head was a peculiarly ruffianly looking individual, who it was not difficult to see was the real Horatius—the keeper of the bridge—and who from his manner and general bearing had apparently no great feelings of liking or respect for his young chief.

Poor young chief, the thought of him boxed up in the heart of the wild Bakhtiari hills with that

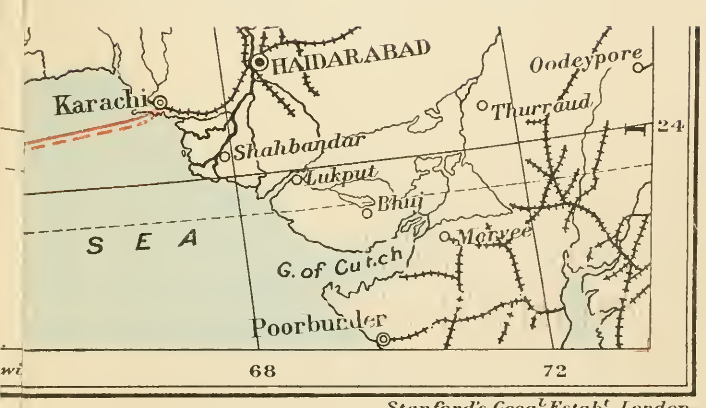
cut-throat crew, often occurred to me on our onward journey to Ahwaz, and still does, as I write, since I suppose he is still there!

It was at this halt that C—— and I first used our tents. Up to now we had been able to get shelter in caravanserais or in villages, but now these failed, as the remaining *manzils* were merely camping-grounds near water.

Another four days, made up of travelling such as already described, brought us into the district of Arabistan, where we found a complete change of country—the rugged hills giving place to flat or undulating plain and desert. The people also changed with the land-features, and instead of the high-capped Persians we moved amongst Arabs, with their head-dresses of beringed kerchiefs, their flowing cloaks, and their harsh guttural Arabic speech. For Arabistan—as its name implies—is inhabited by Arab tribes, and is indeed one of the Eastern outposts of those Arab peoples, who—whether in town, village, or desert, whether civilised, semi-civilised, or nomadic—stretch westward across Arabia, Syria, Egypt, and North Africa, until from the walls of Mogador they gaze upon the long rollers of the Atlantic Ocean.

Across Arabistan we travelled for some three marches—and easy ones they were too after those infernal hills we had left behind us. On the afternoon of the 18th day after Ispahan we sighted Ahwaz, and within an hour were enjoying the hospitality of the British Consulate.




HAIDARABAD
Oodeypore
Karachi
Thurraud
24
Shahbandar
Lukput
Bhuj
S E A
Morvee
G. of Cutch
Poorbunder
68
72
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INDEX

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